ABSTRACT OF THESIS

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Title of Thesis The Attitude of Edward Gibbon Towards Ecclesiastical History.

This study has attempted to understand Gibbon's approach to ecclesiastical history and to evaluate it in the light of current thinking on the subject. It was seen that three major sources contributed to the historian's preparation: the eighteenth century environment, the impact of external circumstances, and certain individual qualities in the man himself. It was indicated that Gibbon had a 'philosophy of history' only in the empirical sense of possessing a fundamental viewpoint from which he approached his materials. His treatment of his predecessors was defended from the charge of being 'pre-Copernican' on the strength of the fact that he made an unmistakable attempt to assess the trustworthiness of his authorities, however inadequate by current standards.

Gibbon's attitude towards ecclesiastical history, it was argued, did not spring from a specific antagonism against Christianity but from a general feeling for life which was in operation over the total range of his experience and observation. Prominent in this outlook were an admiration for ancient Rome, a reflection of eighteenth century rationalism and scientism; a distrust for zeal, and a sense of the importance of individual independence. Understandably, Gibbon applied this predisposition of his mind to the materials of ecclesiastical history.

It was further argued that Gibbon's treatment of Christianity must be traced against the background of his interest in <u>all</u> the factors involved in Rome's decay and fall rather than on the common and erroneous supposition that he had singled out Christianity as the chief cause of the catastrophe.

It was concluded that Gibbon's employment of the ironical device of limiting his consideration of Christianity to an inquiry into the 'secondary' causes of its success was an important element in the defence of his work as a restricted and a scientific study. It was seen also that his apparent unawareness of his assumptions was a most significant

Use other side if necessary.

weakness; for it betrayed him, in his irony and innuendo, into a dismissal of the Supernatural from history, a dismissal which could not be substantiated by the evidence of critical history. It was concluded, however, that lasting importance may be attached to Gibbon's inquiry for its insight into the eighteenth century mentality, for its alternate view of ecclesiastical history, for its effect upon subsequent approaches to the subject, and for its attack upon a mistaken conception of the 'historical' element in Faith itself.

THE ATTITUDE OF EDWARD GIBBON TOWARDS ECCLESIASTICAL HISTORY

A THESIS SUBMITTED IN
PARTIAL FULFILMENT OF THE REQUIREMENTS
FOR THE DEGREE OF
DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY
AT
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BY
EDWIN KENDRICK ROBERTS

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INTRODUCTION

Many Christian writers have seen fit to attempt to answer Edward Gibbon's treatment of ecclesiastical history. Some few rationalist thinkers have been prompted to take up the pen in his defence. But few indeed have been the efforts to estimate the nature and significance of his History apart from the impetus of controversy.

This study has attempted to understand, rather than to answer or defend, Gibbon's attitude towards ecclesiastical history. The aim was to trace the essential background out of which his work emerged, to inquire into the fundamental features of his handling of Christian history, and to ascertain the factors which produced his particular approach. At the same time, the effort has been to evaluate Gibbon as an ecclesiastical historian in the light of contemporary thinking on the subject.

The present would seem entirely opportune for this study. For at least two reasons, the previous century could have scant patience with Gibbon. First, it was a period of intense specialization when the task of the historian became that of locating some isolated corner of history and of seeking to disentangle its essential character.[1] Thus not one but many scholars must combine to establish the vast structure which is history. Under these

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1 Is there not a story of a German historian who, on being invited to deliver a lecture on the sixteenth century, indignantly replied: "My life-task is the history of Germany from 1525 to 1530"?

circumstances, the attempted scope and sweep of The Decline and Fall could only appear presumptuous. It could not be considered within the sphere of serious, 'scientific' history.

Secondly, in their supposition that it was necessary for the historian to 'wash his mind' of all traces of bias and partisan allegiance and to assume an attitude of neutrality, nineteenth century thinkers understandably regarded as quaint and naive an ecclesiastical historian who obviously slanted his material and made no effort to conceal his decided preference for the Empire over against the Church. Such an 'uncritical' writer scarcely warranted the attention of repudiation; more appropriately, he could be ignored.

But the position has changed. No longer is specialization regarded as sufficient for the purposes of history. There is increasing recognition of an intimate interwovenness in the life of the past, that the parts must be understood in relation to the whole; in short, that the sweep of history must be restored. And it is now freely acknowledged that freedom from bias is not possible. No writer approaches the materials of ecclesiastical history with a blank mind; nor would it be desirable if he did.

Thus it can be claimed that however akin his mentality was to his own age and to no other, Gibbon nevertheless would have been more at home in the twentieth century than in the nineteenth. And this is a consideration which may permit a more sympathetic reconstruction of his attitude than would have been conceivable a hundred or even fifty years ago.

A brief explanation is called for concerning the manner in which this study is presented, particularly with respect to the

extensive use of footnotes and appendices. Frequent reference to other writers, especially contemporaries, has been made with full understanding that they were not to be regarded in any sense as 'authorities'. Yet some indication that many of the thoughts being advanced were not new or novel, that they had occurred to other minds before occurring to one's own, seemed appropriate.

Reference also has been made to numerous critics who have written about Gibbon; not on the one hand, for the purpose of establishing a consensus; nor on the other, for the pleasure of castigating one's predecessors; but simply because to attempt to assess the merits of Gibbon on one point or another where experienced critics have already given their verdict would be foolhardy if one did not begin by availing oneself of their guidance or at least by taking them into account.

References to Gibbon's writings are commonly made in the notes to illustrate and substantiate statements made in the argument. And in order more clearly to indicate the real impact of the historian's attitude, it was often felt that mere page references were not sufficient, and therefore in many instances passages have been quoted in full. While the indulgence of the reader is entreated for the additional length which this method has entailed, it is clear that the argument could move faster because this material was not introduced into the text. Effort has been made to make the argument continuous and in a sense complete apart from any reference to the notes.

The writer would acknowledge his indebtedness to the typist, Mrs. Jean Collier, for her patience and accuracy; to his wife for many helpful suggestions; to Herbert Butterfield, whose thinking

about Christianity and its relationship to history has been of immeasurable assistance; and to the great work of Gibbon, which has never failed to be stimulating and which has opened for this writer a new window into the history of the Church.

Throughout the inquiry, except where otherwise specified, the references to The Decline and Fall are to Bury's revised edition, 1926 (seven volumes). The Autobiography used is from the World's Classics Series, with an introduction by J. B. Bury, 1907; except where Memoir A., B., etc., are cited; then the reference is to the edition of John Murray, 1897. Finally, the references to Gibbon's Miscellaneous Works, are to the edition of 1837 by Lord Sheffield (one volume).

CHAPTER I

THE PREPARATION OF THE HISTORIAN

It is generally agreed that the function of the biographer is to ascertain not just the outward facts of a famous man's life but the inward springs and relations of his character as well. As Carlyle once observed, the effort must be to answer certain fundamental questions: "How did the world and man's life represent themselves to his mind? How did coexisting circumstances modify him from without? How did he modify them from within? In one word, what was the effect of society on him? What was his effect on society?"[1]

The Historian and History

A nineteenth century conception.-- Such an inquiry into an historian's life is necessary, it now appears, not only to meet the requirements of biography but for an understanding of history itself. This was not always acknowledged. In the nineteenth century, the individuality of the historian was considered of negligible significance other, that is, than from a biographical standpoint. For certain, it was assumed that the historian would be reliable. But his purpose was to recover 'objective' history. This could be accomplished by recourse to the archives and the dispassionate study of

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1 The writer is indebted for this quotation from Carlyle to Bertram Wolfe, Diego Rivera (London: Robert Hale, 1939), p.v. Carlyle added, "He who should answer these questions in regard to any individual would, as we believe, furnish a model of perfection in biography."

documents. What his personal history happened to be was of no consequence. In fact, his inquiry could be regarded as 'history' to the extent that he succeeded in eliminating these subjective considerations.

A modern view.-- By contrast, the tendency today is to recognize the importance to history of the historian. Critics agree that there are no objective events or facts apart from someone's subjective interpretation.[1] Out of all the multitudinous materials of the past, the significant items must be selected, and that selection will depend not upon the matter of history but upon the mind of the historian. In short, the human element is a factor which no amount of historical research can eliminate. History can never be an exact science. Between the present and the past, as one writer has aptly suggested, there remains a "screen"; and the historian alone is the "hole" in that screen.[2]

Thus there are several considerations about Edward Gibbon which must be evaluated in order to appraise accurately his treatment of ecclesiastical history. Perhaps this can be done by seeking to answer the questions which were raised at the outset: "How did the world and man's life represent themselves to his mind? How did coexisting circumstances modify him from without? How did he modify them from within?"

Eighteenth Century Background

Gibbon's world was the eighteenth century, a strong-minded age which exercised an influence upon all its sons, but not least of

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1 For a fuller statement of the impossibility of 'objectivity' in history, see Chapter Three of this inquiry. See also Appendix 1.

2 Cf. Herbert Butterfield, Christianity and History (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1950), p. 23.

all upon Gibbon. Beyond question, it was a period of self-consciousness, of well established principles, and of clearly recognizable assumptions. For purposes of this inquiry, these characteristic features of the era may be analysed: its general disposition towards self-confidence, tolerance and secularism; its approach to history; its specifically religious development.

The confidence of the eighteenth century.-- A faith in the stability and regularity of the forces of nature contributed to the confidence of the age.[1] On the strength of the scientific discoveries of the previous century, it was assumed that nature had been brought into a system of order and complete predictability. Instead of being victimized by nature, man could now be master over it. And these laws of nature were one with laws of reason which were also universal and unchangeable. It was a definite universe, and man need be under no uncertainty regarding his relationship to it.

Coupled with this confidence in the external world was a belief in the essential goodness of human nature which had been corrupted by evil customs and institutions. On the Continent, Diderot and the Encyclopaedists were arguing that there was nothing in humanity itself to keep the world from becoming a desirable dwelling place.[2] The budding radicalism of this movement was rejected in England, but its attitude towards human nature was widely shared.[3] Life was moving forward; the idea of progress was in the air; there was even

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1 The meaning of the term 'nature' in eighteenth century usage is ambiguous. See Appendix 2.

2 Cf. John Morley, Diderot and the Encyclopaedists (London: Macmillan & Co., 1886), I, 3. Morley described Diderot's achievement as a "combining of the scientific idea and the social idea."

3 By Shaftesbury, e.g., and the Cambridge Platonists.

talk of the infinite perfectibility of man through education. How could this age fail to feel confident and sufficient in itself?

The conception of tolerance.-- Equally a part of the general mentality was the idea that while men might differ on many subjects, these differences could be regarded with tolerance and even indifference. The one sin was to introduce the note of partisan bitterness in support of a particular view. This was the reason for a suspicious attitude towards religion. Philosophers like Holbach claimed that religion tended to produce superstition, which in turn led to intolerance; and intolerance was the enemy of enlightened humanity.[1]

But this attitude ought not to be interpreted as implacable hostility to religion. The age felt that it could afford to be generous. Superstition belonged to the childhood of the race, and the advance of rationality would eliminate such ideas. Meanwhile, the vulgar man need not be deprived of his objects of devotion provided he did not interfere with the pursuits of the rational man. Intolerant attitudes of all descriptions would be set aside. Not even the recognition of the evils of superstition was regarded as sufficient reason to upset the aspiring tolerance of the age.

Tendencies towards secularism.-- A critic has argued that the Enlightenment meant "the attempt to secularize every department of human life and thought."[2] And it may be acknowledged that this

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1 Holbach, Systeme de la Nature, cited by Basil Willey, The Eighteenth Century Background (London: Chatto & Windus, 1940), p. 165. See Chapter Four for a discussion of Gibbon's indictment of superstition, a position which largely reflected this view, even though he specifically disassociated himself from Holbach and the Encyclopaedists. Cf. Memoir B., p. 202. Cf. also Appendix 2.

2 R. G. Collingwood, The Idea of History (Oxford: The Clarendon Press, 1946), p. 76.

effort occupied a major portion of the energy of the age. Religion must be redirected into useful channels. It must evidence more total involvement in the affairs of the present world, since this was the only world about which man could be certain.

Contributing to this attitude was a clinging to the specific and the tangible. There was a concern for definite information, and creeds and other worldly speculations appeared profitless and pointless. Equally operative was a cosmopolitan perspective which enabled men to envisage the traditions of Christianity not as universal but as the religious expression of the particular part of the world into which Western man had happened to be born. Simple people might believe their own faith to be true in some exclusive sense; the sophisticated and the informed knew better.[1]

What was needed nowwas to recast Christian doctrines and ideas into practical concepts which would be understandable to thinking men everywhere, and so to recover their real significance. Thus a contemporary historian has asserted that the excessive individualism of the Enlightenment arose out of the Christian doctrine of personality, its humanitarianism from the Christian doctrine of charity, and the concept of 'Europe' out of the idea of Christendom.[2] And if the period possessed a version of a 'Kingdom of God', this could be identified with the Enlightenment itself; its fulfillment, despite a few dark areas of exception, had already begun.

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1 An English writer, visiting in Paris, reported that he had been informed by his philosopher friends that "I was the only person they had ever met with, of whose understanding they had any opinion, who professed to believe Christianity." Cf. Joseph Priestley, Memoirs to the Year 1795, Reprint from Edition of 1809 (London: H. R. Allenson, 1904), p. 48.

2 Cf. Herbert Butterfield, Christianity in European History (London: Collins, 1951), p. 39.

Approach to history.-- Of particular pertinence to this inquiry is the attitude of Gibbon's world towards history. Understandably, the same spirit of confidence prevailed. There was a sense of emerging from the darkness of the Middle Ages. Under the auspices of the universal reason, the hour had struck for history to show the way, to demonstrate the triumphant progress of the human race towards truth and happiness, to establish that there was no limit to the development of human faculties, or to the destiny which man could fashion for himself should he so desire.

Along with this confidence was a concern to recover the internal factor in history. The task of the historian was not to collect facts indiscriminately; critical minds were becoming conscious of the inadequacy of lengthy chronicle and learned compilation. The task was to select the significant facts and to explain the reason for their occurrence.[1] This was what gave separateness and special opportunity to the study of history.[2]

It has been charged that the eighteenth century was 'anti-historical'.[3] Whatever the degree of accuracy of this estimate, it does not indicate the avowed mood of the age; for the subject had become popular;[4] the stress on the solid and the tangible had given a new impetus to historical inquiry; the stage was set for the great advances of the nineteenth century.

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1 Cf. Benadetto Croce, Theory and History of Historiography, translated by Douglas Ainslie (London: George Harrap & Co., 1921), p. 245; also, Appendix 3.

2 See Chapter Two for a reflection of this consciousness in Gibbon.

3 Cf. Nicolas Berdyaev, The Meaning of History (London: The Centenary Press, 1936), p. 112.

4 But there was not complete agreement about history. See Appendix 3.

Nor was the historiography of the period devoid of a critical attitude. The mood of scepticism was in the air, and the mood of modern science. Particularly was there sensitivity to the credulity and ignorance of the medieval period. This was reflected in the scepticism of Voltaire, who doubted the reliability of the historical Roman tradition itself.[1] Critics began to question accounts of the past provided by earlier historians; they sought to reconstruct events according to their own specifications as to how these events must have occurred.[2]

This sharp reaction to medieval thought has prompted the charge that eighteenth century historiography was not genuinely critical but polemical. A critic has contended that the Enlightenment historians took over the conception of historical research which had been devised by the Church historians of the late seventeenth century, and turned it against its authors, "using it in a deliberately anti-clerical spirit instead of a deliberately clerical one."[3] But if the argument is valid that the age did not exhibit the bitter antagonism towards religion which has been assumed, then it is doubtful whether the 'polemical' was the prime reason for its writing of history.

A more searching criticism of this general approach to history is that it was non-developmental. History was not regarded as an unfolding of a single pattern of intimate interrelatedness.[4] A critic has observed that "only a slight degree of fusion was

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1 Cf. Collingwood, op. cit., p. 78.
2 Cf. Croce, op. cit., p. 256.
3 Collingwood, op. cit., p. 81.
4 A further limiting feature of Enlightenment historiography, its conception of human nature, has been examined in connection with Gibbon's philosophy of history. See Chapter Two.

attained in the various histories of culture, of customs, and of the arts."[1] And it may be granted that there was little effort to develop the various aspects of life 'organically'.

But theories of holism and developmentalism are of more recent origin; and even as one notes what are now considered deficiencies in the eighteenth century attitude, one ought to remember that it was not as though the age had failed to utilize something that had been grasped before, or something that might have been understood as the next inevitable step in man's thought about history.

Attitude towards religion.-- In this survey of the world of Gibbon, it is necessary to examine briefly its religious development, Deism. This movement issued out of the same confidence in the efficacy of the universal reason.[2] All forms of knowledge, including religion, must submit to the single bar of judgement. Thus while revelation might be accepted, its validity must be measured by man's reason.[3] The sound approach was to believe only what could be understood, and to understand only what conformed to the rule of reason.

Basic also to the religious thought of the period was the concept of nature. The typical attitude was to accept Christianity only as a republication in a particular form of the more universal religion of nature. It was agreed that the Gospel had brought nothing new into the world. Christ rather announced general principles which had always been valid and which could be ascertained apart from any special revelation.

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1 Croce, op. cit., p. 257.
2 The nature of reason was never clearly defined. See Appendix 4.
3 Locke's thought is illustrative of this supposition.

From these premises, the logical step was to strip away all the accoutrements of religion which now at last could be recognized as superfluous to a mature man's faith.[1] Immediately dismissed was the concept of the Supernatural. In this orderly world, who could believe in the continued agency of supernatural powers? After this opening wedge, question quickly arose regarding the authenticity of the reports of remote supernatural activity. If it was impossible to believe that God interfered with natural law in the present, why should it be supposed that He did so in antiquity?[2]

With the Supernatural removed from an active role in the historic process, there remained a Creator Deity, aloof and transcendent. The existence of this Being was amply attested by the works of nature, but He remained apart from the world. Left alone on earth, man was thrown back on his natural resources, his own moral sense. But this was sufficient. Morality needed no supernatural sanctions. It could assimilate into itself all the essential features of religion.[3]

But the consequences of this stripping-away process were conducive neither to the interests of religion nor morality. As has been suggested, the quest for morality does not, and in this instance, did not, lead to morality. The results rather were

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1 For inconsistencies in the application of this tendency, see Appendix 4.

2 Hume saw the implications of this more clearly than Middleton, who insisted that his attack on the veracity of miracles did not extend to the apostolic period. Cf. Conyers Middleton, A Free Inquiry into the Miraculous Powers (London: R. Manby & H. S. Cox, 1748). Hume contended that the argument led to a complete dismissal of the Deity from the historic process. Cf. David Hume, Essays and Treatises, a New Edition (Edinburgh: Bell & Bradfute, 1793), II, 120 ff.

3 It was argued that moral virtue was the essence and life of all true religion. Against this background, Gibbon's moralistic tendencies can be better understood.

hypocrisy and spiritual stagnation. Gibbon wrote caustically that he might have selected for his vocation "the fat slumbers of the church";[1] and a later critic observed that "it is among the excuses for Gibbon that he lived in such a world."[2]

Impact of External Circumstances

A contemporary has contended that the "great differences which we see between men are due more often than we can remember to the fact that some are fortunate in their birth, their physical structure, their education, their environment, fortunate in all the operation of accompanying circumstances."[3] But if this general statement can be said to have applied to Edward Gibbon, it requires an expanded sense of the term 'fortunate', since many aspects of his early years would appear to have been otherwise. A brief appraisal of these external factors, and the way they affected Gibbon, is the next step in this inquiry.[4]

The preponderance of negative factors.-- Prominent among these questionable considerations was the frailty of his early health. The Autobiography indicates that there were few known ailments from which he did not suffer in his childhood. Many times his

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1 Autobiography, p. 163.

2 Walter Bagehot, Literary Studies (London: Longmans, Green & Co., 1905), I, 237. It may be questioned whether the author of The Decline and Fall required 'excuses'; but the point of the comment is not lost for that reason.

3 Herbert Butterfield, Christianity and History, p. 44.

4 In this section, it is not considered necessary to present a 'life' of Gibbon. The standard work on the subject for many years was J. C. Morison, Gibbon "English Men of Letters" (London: Macmillan, 1879). That the topic is of current interest is indicated by Michael Joyce, Edward Gibbon (London: Longmans, Green & Co., 1953). A more careful study is G. M. Young, Gibbon (London: Peter Davies, 1932). But the best 'life' was written by Gibbon himself, and the Autobiography is generally acknowledged as one of the immortal achievements of English literature.

aunt sat at his bedside, expecting each hour to be the last. In the baptism of each of his brothers, his father prudently repeated his Christian name; thus in the event of his early departure, "the patronymic appellation might be still perpetuated in the family."[1] Even though he survived, physical weakness caused many interruptions in his education, as he was called "from the school of learning to the bed of sickness."[2]

But Gibbon's early frailty was not without compensation, as the mature man recognized in retrospect. Many precious hours "were employed in my closet which at the same age are wasted on horseback."[3] The child became introspective; and the life of the intellect, to which he had natural attraction, was further enhanced by the fact that it was the only life open to him.

A second 'unfortunate' circumstance was the loss of his grandfather's fortune, and the general factor of family instability. The latter could be traced to his mother's death in the tenth year of his life, and to his father's inconstancy. To the former, the historian made wistful reference.[4] But this event, dating back almost a generation before his birth, would have been of less consequence had his own father been of more dependable character.[5] Sadly he noted that several undertakings which had been profitable in the hands of the merchant became barren or adverse in those of

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1 Autobiography, p. 21. Ironically, the historian was the only one of seven to survive childhood.

2 Ibid., p. 21.

3 Memoir C., p. 236.

4 "I should mention . . . the irreparable loss of above ninety-six thousand pounds of which . . . I have been ultimately deprived"(Memoir F., p. 15).

5 For a further delineation of Gibbon's estimate of the character of his father, see Appendix 5.

the gentleman. As a consequence, Gibbon never felt free of financial insecurity.

But upon closer scrutiny, this apparent instability is seen to be another instance of a fortunate misfortune. The partial collapse of his family meant that he was placed in the care of an able and conscientious aunt, for whose interest and encouragement Gibbon often acknowledged his indebtedness.[1] And unrestricted resources might have tempted him to a life of indolence, while limited means suggested the wisdom of application and industry.[2]

Another 'unfortunate' factor was the upheaval in education and religion which marred his early years. From the Autobiography, it is clear that his experience at Oxford (1752-3) was very desultory, that he received no religious instruction and little enlightenment whatever.[3] By virtue of the vacuum thus created, his deflection to the Roman communion becomes understandable;[4] and it was this event in turn which caused his banishment from Oxford and England, his 'exile' to Lausanne, and all the unforgetable unpleasantries of Madame Pavilliard's table.

Yet again there is indication of a guiding star. For had Gibbon not become a Catholic, had his adolescence been continued in the Oxford environment, had he never been exposed to the instruction of M. Pavilliard, it would be difficult to envisage his future greatness. He himself acknowledged what might have been the consequence:

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1 He referred to her as "the true mother of my mind as well as my health." (Autobiography, p. 26)

2 "Had I been rich and independent, I should have prolonged and perhaps fixed my residence in Paris" (Autobiography, p. 30).

3 For a fuller indication of the nature of this experience, see Appendix 5.

4 "The blind activity of idleness urged me to advance without armour into the dangerous mazes of controversy" (Autobiography, p. 46).

i.e., to be immersed "in port and prejudice among the monks of Oxford . . . if my childish revolt against the religion of my country had not stript me in time of my academic gown."[1] And of the final effect of being whisked away to "a barren and uninteresting corner with the injunction to behave", he was able one day to write: "Whatever have been the fruits of my education, they must be ascribed to the fortunate shipwreck which cast me on the shore of Lake Leman."[2]

A fourth episode which would scarcely seem to point to the smile of fortune was his ill-fated love affair.[3] This romance with Suzanne Curchod, a young woman of charm and intelligence, was ended apparently by Gibbon himself; and much abuse has been heaped upon him for his famous statement of acquiescence to his father's wishes.[4]

Whatever the ethics of the relationship, it was not without favourable effect upon the historian of the Roman Empire. Gibbon asserted that it enabled him better to understand women;[5] but this claim may be greeted with a smile in view of the conclusions he reached.[6] Less questionably, it gave him a taste for something other than books; and its prompt termination afforded him the opportunity to pursue his study free of the encroachment and additional financial burden of family life. It meant that the independence

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1 Autobiography, p. 85.

2 Ibid.

3 This incident has not failed to arouse the speculation of biographers. For conflicting versions of its essential character, see Meredith Read, Historic Studies (London: Chatto & Windus, 1897), I; D. M. Low, Edward Gibbon 1737-1794 (London: Chatto & Windus, 1937); and J. M. Robertson, Gibbon "Life Stories of Famous Men" (London: Watts & Co., 1926). See also Appendix 5.

4 "I sighed as a lover; I obeyed as a son" (Autobiography, p. 84).

5 "This episode, curious throughout, has been of great use to me. It has opened my eyes to the character of women" (Ibid., p. ix).

6 Did the experience enlighten or sour him? See Appendix 5.

which he deemed indispensable to his effectiveness as an historian could be maintained.[1] Thus the real significance of the romantic failure was that his historical inquiry might become the unrivalled allegiance of his life.[2]

A critic has cited this conflux of seemingly negative circumstances, particularly those associated with Gibbon's conversion and forced departure from England, as indicative of the historian's 'good luck'.[3] One suspects that there are materials here which would submit to an interpretation of a more providential nature. At any rate, it is suggestive in a modest way of Gibbon's own later insight that out of evil, good may come.[4]

Positive considerations also present.-- Not all the circumstances of Gibbon's early years were negative, even at first glance. Thus a factor vital to his coming career was the recovery of his health. He reported that during his sixteenth year nature displayed in his favour her mysterious energies, and all his assortment of ills suddenly vanished.[5] In looking back over the years, he could write, "Few people have been more exempt from real or imaginary ills."[6] This reprieve meant that his historical effort would not be sapped by constant physical disability.

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1 For a fuller statement of this insistence in Gibbon, see Chapter Four.

2 A critic argued, "Learning was his true mistress . . . faith a passing love." Cf. Peter Quennell, Four Portraits, "Studies of the Eighteenth Century" (London: Collins, 1945) p. 83 . But so too were all the romantic interests of his life.

3 J. M. Robertson, Gibbon, p. 5.

4 See Chapter Two for an indication of this idea in Gibbon.

5 Autobiography, p. 30.

6 Ibid., p. 30. This was not strictly true, as an ailment believed to be a rupture and left untended from early manhood was to cause him considerable discomfort and eventually to shorten his life.

A second positive factor was the ampleness of income which, despite his worry, Gibbon enjoyed through the years of maturity. That income appeared providentially to be protected; for the death of his brothers allowed the modest inheritance not to be decimated by division; and his father's passing saved the family fortune from further depletion. Thus if he had been spared from the perils of too much wealth, he was also saved from the fatal restriction of too little.[1]

As a consequence of this ampleness of income, Gibbon had the opportunity to travel. And this was a factor which also was an important item in his preparation as an historian. A contemporary has claimed that the historian who studies central or eastern Europe is not likely to understand much about it, unless he goes there.[2] In no instance was this assertion more clearly illustrated than in that of Gibbon.

Travel enlarged his horizon in a general way. If it is not true that his extended stay abroad (1753-1758) meant that he "ceased to be an Englishman," there is no question but that he ceased to be insular.[3] The extent of the French influence upon the impressionable youth, the impact of its scepticism and cosmopolitanism, would

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1 "The mediocrity of my life and fortune," he confessed, "above poverty and below riches, has powerfully contributed to the application and the success of the historian" (Memoir D., p. 414).

2 Harold Temperley, Research and Modern History, "An Inaugral Lecture Delivered at Cambridge, Nov., 19, 1930" (London: Macmillan & Co., 1930), p. 10.

3 Gibbon himself made this claim, but it applied only to a temporary period. Cf. Autobiography, p. 85. There are other instances in which he proudly asserted his patriotic allegiance, in which he "gloried in the name of an Englishman," particularly after his disillusionment with the excesses of the French Revolution. Cf. Ibid., p. 214.

be difficult to overestimate.[1]

But more specifically, his visit to Rome in 1764 supplied Gibbon with the stimulus which was to determine the selection of the subject of his great work.[2] So appreciative was he of the importance of this factor that he confided in his Journal that the man who does not travel early runs the risk of not travelling at all.[3] One is left with the feeling that no greater misfortune could befall not only the budding historian but any aspirant to the enlightened life.

Another consideration which had a positive impact upon the future historian was his period of service (1760-1762) in the English militia. Gibbon admittedly was not always impressed with the constructive character of this chapter in his youth.[4] Yet he also acknowledged its salutary effect both upon the average man and upon himself.[5] His pride in this practical episode in his past, and his consciousness of its helpfulness to an historian, were reflected in the condescension with which he referred to "mere scholars, who have perhaps never seen a battalion under arms."[6]

A conclusion.-- This brief survey of the major circumstances,

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1 Gibbon recounted that he not only came to speak fluent French, but also to think in that language, so much so that his English suffered. Cf. Autobiography, p. 58.

2 See Chapter Four for a discussion of the determining character of this experience. See also Appendix 5.

3 Gibbon's Journal to January 28th, 1763, edited by D. M. Low (London: Chatto & Windus, 1937), p. xiv.

4 In one instance, he referred to it as "a wandering life of military servitude" (Autobiography, p. 104).

5 "The greatest part of these men were rather civilized than corrupted by the habits of military subordination" (Memoir B., p. 188). And in an oft-quoted sentence, he wrote, "The captain of the Hampshire grenadiers (the reader may smile) has not been useless to the historian of the Roman Empire" (Autobiography, p. 106).

6 Gibbon's Journal, p. xcvi. See also Appendix 5. But one

both favourable and unfavourable, which marked Edward Gibbon's rise to maturity, indicates that he derived some preparation or incentive or assistance for his life's work from all of them. The critic was probably correct in contending that "not in the case of Shakespeare are the pressures and permissions of fate [or of Providence] more impressive as determinants than in that of Gibbon!"[1]

Looking back over his life, appraising not only his achievement but the conditions which made it possible, Gibbon was prepared to express his satisfaction.[2] To go beyond that to thanksgiving and praise could scarcely be expected of this 'typical embodiement' of the mentality of the Enlightenment.

The Individuality of the Historian

When full acknowledgement has been made of the influence of the eighteenth century, as well as the impact of personal circumstances, there yet remains something unique in the figure of the man himself which was of inestimable importance to the emergence of a great historian.[3] In the last analysis, the crucial consideration must be, not what were the external influences, but what was in Gibbon? What were the features of his individuality which prompted him to respond as he did? How did he modify the external factors

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consequence of his military life, which did not contribute to his preparation as an historian, was a tendency towards excessive drinking, a habit which was only overcome with difficulty in later life. One does not derive this impression from the Autobiography, but it is evident in the Journal, where many mornings were recorded as lost to the student as a result of the excess of the night before.

1 J. M. Robertson, Gibbon, p. 33.

2 "When I contemplate the common lot of mortality, I must acknowledge that I have drawn a high prize in the lottery of life" (Autobiography, p. 217).

3 For current views on this subject, see Appendix 6.

from within?

His own awareness.-- Gibbon was very conscious of the importance of this consideration.[1] In the Autobiography, he gratefully cited his mother's advice to the effect that "I was now going into the world and must learn to think and act for myself."[2] That he took these words seriously is suggested by the particular character of his religious pilgrimage. In his turning to Rome, he claimed that neither a priest nor any member of that Church registered an influence;[3] his conversion was the result of his own reasoning. And in his return to Protestantism, he asserted that the contribution of his tutor, Pavilliard, must be acknowledged; but the decisive factor was the movement of his own mind.[4] The same might be said of his mounting scepticism. While he recognized the impact of the writings of Bayle and Chillingworth,[5] the form which his scepticism took was distinctively his own.[6] This distinctiveness stemmed in part at least from a conscious effort after individuality.

Elements of his individuality.-- It remains to examine the main features of Gibbon's personal, internal equipment for his task. One was his early discovery of the direction of his life's

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1 "Everyman who rises above the common level," he wrote, "has received two educations, the one from his teachers, and the second, more personal and important, from himself" (Autobiography, p. 66).

2 Ibid., p. 24.

3 "I never conversed with a priest, or even with a Papist, till my resolution from books was absolutely fixed" (Ibid., p. 48).

4 "I am willing to allow him a handsome share in the honour of my conversion; yet I must observe it was principally effected by my private reflection" (Ibid., p. 63).

5 Ibid., p. 51.

6 A. H. Thompson, Gibbon, (Historical Association Pamphlet, General Series, 1946) p. 9. See Chapter Three for an examination of the particular character of Gibbon's scepticism. See also Appendix 6.

ambition. Unlike many historians who have realized their historical role relatively late in life, Gibbon quickly saw where his real interest lay.[1] For certain, the method of trial and error and the stimulus of a visit to Rome were required to determine his actual subject. Yet there was no uncertainty about the general nature of the effort to be made. It would be history. The advantage thus derived in the channelling of youthful reading is obvious. And this propensity for his subject, he insisted, was sustained by his own determination alone.[2]

Of equal importance to Gibbon's preparation as an ecclesiastical historian was an early interest in religion. In his childhood, religious questions had been discussed with his aunt. Perhaps it was her simple piety which aroused questions in the mind of the child. Whatever the reason, an attitude of scepticism was early in evidence.[3] But this disposition did not prompt him to dismiss the subject of religion as of no consequence;[4] the intricate mazes of theology remained a permanent interest of his maturity.[5] Thus in his approach to ecclesiastical history, he had the impetus of a marked and early interest in both aspects of his subject.

Another item in Gibbon's individual equipment was the

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1 From his early youth, he claimed that he "aspired to the character of an historian" (Autobiography, p. 117).

2 "Without the discipline of a master or the advice of a friend, the early bent of my mind was directed to the histories of all ages and nations" (Gibbon's Journal, p. 6).

3 Examples of Gibbon's early scepticism are found in Appendix 6.

4 It is a mistake to interpret this youthful scepticism as antagonism towards religion. Cf. Chapter Four.

5 The number of books on 'theologia' followed books on 'historia' and 'lit. humaniores' in Gibbon's library. See The Library of Edward Gibbon, "A Catalogue of his Books" with an Introduction by Geoffrey Keynes (London: Jonathan Cape, 1940), p. 20.

methodical quality of his mind. This is instanced by his approach to reading which, despite the lack of guidance, was not haphazard.[1] The same methodical tendency is suggested by his careful study of the French and Latin languages.[2] And he had the habit of taking mental stock of his intellectual acquisitions, reducing them to their capital value.[3] Thus it became possible to marshal and apply his whole available supply of knowledge to any subject. This meant that he could handle immense amounts of material with consummate skill and ease.

Gibbon also possessed exceptional powers of memory. A youthful meeting with Voltaire, in which the great man allowed him to read one of his poems just twice, suggests this; for twice was sufficient; Gibbon knew it by heart.[4] Likewise, his method of composition — phrasing an entire paragraph in his mind before committing any of it to paper — pointed to powers of retention beyond the ordinary.[5] His ability to remember is further attested to by the relatively few instances of repetition or contradiction in his History.[6] It is also seen in the amazing scope of particular information which Gibbon not only possessed but which he kept at his fingertips.[7] While clearly traceable to the precocious interests

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1 E.g., he systematically went through the Latin classics in four divisions; (Autobiography, p. 69) and he recorded his aim to cover the whole field of classical literature. (Gibbon's Journal, p.5)

2 A description of Gibbon's method is given in Appendix 6.

3 Autobiography, p. 94.

4 Ibid., p. 81. Gibbon added, "In writing this trivial incident, I wished to find whether my memory was impaired, but I have the comfort of finding that every line of the poem is still engrained in fresh and indelible characters."

5 Gibbon's own statement of this practice is found in Appendix 6.

6 But see Chapters Two and Four for an indication of the significance of some of the exceptions.

7 For illustration of this contention, see Appendix 6.

of the child, this passion for the particular could be fully utilized only by an historian who had a real capacity to remember.

A final item in Gibbon's individual equipment for his future task was a fundamental openness of mind. His religious pilgrimage from Protestantism to Catholicism, back to Protestantism, and thence to scepticism, may be cited as an instance of this characteristic. Such shifting exposed him to the charge of emotional instability and inconstancy. But it at least equally indicates a willingness to follow his logic wherever it led him, and regardless of consequence.[1] The same openness was reflected in the developing insights of The Decline and Fall; and one feels that it was this factor rather than a failure of memory that was responsible for the instances of contradiction therein.[2] Moreover, his sensitivity to the pitfalls of partisan allegiance meant that he would attempt to approach his materials apart from set theories and preconceptions.

A problem.-- Against the supposition of Gibbon's open-mindedness, critics have argued that his consciousness of the prejudices of others did not keep him from prejudices of his own. And in many respects, it is to become evident that the historian did not rise materially above the level of eighteenth century thought. Yet the impulse to maintain a mind free of partisan

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1 It ought to be acknowledged that his deflection to Rome, and his determination to stand alone against family, academic institution, and national heritage, required more courage than has been attributed to him. Gibbon referred to it as "an honest sacrifice of interest to conscience" (Autobiography, p. 50).

2 E.g., Gibbon advanced not one but several chief causes for the fall of Rome, a circumstance which leads one to suspect that he had no preconceived theory on the subject, but was open to the facts as he found them. Cf. Chapter Four.

prejudice was in accord with the true historical spirit, and was a standard against which his own failure could be measured. But in what sense did he fail, and in what sense did he succeed? The remaining chapters of this inquiry seek to answer these questions.

Meanwhile, it is clear that in the early awakening of his historical interest, in the methodical approach to himself as well as his materials, in the capaciousness of his memory, and in the aspiring openness of his mind, there were assembled in Edward Gibbon the elements of uniqueness which alone could produce genuine history and a truly great historian.

CHAPTER II

A PHILOSOPHY OF HISTORY

An inquiry into Gibbon's 'philosophy of history' may be deemed an important aspect of an evaluation of his attitude towards ecclesiastical history. The present chapter is concerned with this subject in an overall sense. Those elements in his philosophy which influenced his approach to ecclesiastical history are discussed in a later section of this survey.

The Meaning of the Phrase

A double connotation.-- What precisely is implied by a philosophy of history? Ernst Troeltsch has suggested that the phrase has at least two distinct meanings; the one, metaphysical, seeking to trace the connection between the physical and spiritual worlds, and concerned with the divine direction of the cosmos; the other, empirical, being "the point of view from which the historian passes judgements on the facts of history."[1] Strictly speaking, there is no 'empirical' point of view, but only the empirical historian's assumptions and underlying attitudes. But the critic argued that these must be acknowledged as such, and that they ought also to be analysed.[2]

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1 Ernst Troeltsch, "Historiography," Encyclopaedia of Religion and Ethics, edited by James Hastings (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clarke, 1913), VI, 721. For further views on the meaning of the 'philosophy of history', see Appendix 7.

2 Ibid., p. 721.

Gibbon an empiricist.-- In this second, restricted sense only may Gibbon be understood to have had a philosophy of history. Metaphysics did not concern him.[1] His interest was not in ultimate questions.[2] But he did have definite ideas about history which were in evidence throughout The Decline and Fall. And despite his determination to proceed in empirical fashion, these ideas had emerged for the most part not as a consequence of his study, but as preliminary to it.

Thus this inquiry may be served by considering three further questions about Gibbon: What was the conception of history with which he began? How did he propose to approach his subject? What overall assumptions mark his treatment of history in general? The answers to these questions can be considered together as comprising Gibbon's philosophy of history.

The Purpose of History

History for history's sake.-- For Gibbon, the past had a right to be recovered for its own sake. History need not serve any political or ethical or theological interest. For certain, it could be put to practical use.[3] From knowledge of the past, men might learn better to meet the present.[4] But the very fact of Gibbon's

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1 But the later argument has indicated that his inferences were not without metaphysical implications. Thus it is doubtful whether it can be claimed that "the ultimate meaning . . . of the historical 'processus' in general, he leaves to the reader who will draw his own conclusions." See J. B. Black, The Art of History (London: Methuen & Co., 1926), p. 159.

2 For this reason, the assertion of an indissoluble relationship between history and christology would have been meaningless to Gibbon. See Appendix 7.

3 "The experience of history exalts and enlarges the horizon of our intellectual view" (V, 258).

4 He argued that the purpose of history was "to record the transactions of the past for the instruction of future ages" (II, 87).

own inability to turn his study to constructive account suggests that this was not for him the prime reason for writing history.[1]

Ranke's dictum applicable.-- That purpose might be stated in Ranke's later dictum, "Er will bloss sagen wie es eigentlich gewesen."[2] Gibbon never phrased it so precisely. His statements tended to be couched in moralistic terms.[3] Yet one feels that the reconstruction of events of the past as nearly as possible to the manner in which they really did take place was the end in view which guided and determined his entire historical effort.

Rules of Procedure

In Gibbon's approach to history, the following rules of procedure may be identified: ascertain the facts; cultivate a distrust of theorizing; recount the facts with strict truthfulness; history is more than compiling; the historian must interpret and evaluate the facts; these interpretations are tentative and must be validated continually by the materials of history; an attitude of detachment is essential. A brief indication of the operation of these factors is the next step in this survey.

Ascertain the facts.-- There was in Gibbon's attitude a preoccupation with the recovery of the particulars of history which he called 'facts'. The assumption was that if these could be uncovered their meaning would be clear to an impartial inquirer.

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1 See Chapter Four for a discussion of this 'inability'.

2 Geschichte der romanischen und germanischen Volker, cited by J. B. Black, op. cit., p. 1.

3 E. g., history was to render "to the present age, and to posterity, a just and perfect delineation of all that may be praised, of all that may be excused, of all that may be censured" (Miscellaneous works, p. 767).

This supposition is often reflected in the Essai.[1] No detail in the endless vista need be too small for the historian's contemplation.[2] Nothing, not even interest in a subject itself, was to interfere with his free movement through his materials. The first concern of the historian was to ascertain the facts.

Distrust of theories.-- Coupled with the emphasis on the recovery of the facts was a distrust of theorizing. The historian must not become so attached to a particular reconstruction of history that he refused to recognize facts which did not fit.[3] "Pay more regard," he wrote, "to the facts that spontaneously form themselves into a system than those which you discover after having devised the system."[4] In the study of tangible things and their traceable connections, Gibbon believed that no elaborate theorizing was required but rather an emptying of preconceptions and predispositions.[5]

Fidelity to truth.-- Once the materials were collected with as much freedom from preconceptions as possible, the historian would be motivated by fidelity to truth in reporting them. This fidelity was what gave honour to the calling of the historian.[6] In the

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1 Essai Sur l'etude de la Litterature (1761). See Misc. Works, pp. 625-670. "Facts," he wrote, "are what we must interrogate. Let us listen to what they have to say" (Ibid., p. 660). Again, "Let us preserve them all [the facts] most carefully" (Ibid., p. 657).

2 "We should learn," he argued, "not to be astonished at what appears most absurd and often to distrust what seems best established" (Ibid., p. 654).

3 Was this precisely what Gibbon did do in his treatment of the 'spiritual' side of ecclesiastical history? See Chapters Four and Five for the argument in support of this supposition.

4 Ibid., p. 655.

5 See Appendix 8 for contemporary views on the possibility of such 'self-emptying'.

6 For a collection of Gibbon's statements on this subject, see Appendix 8.

Autobiography, Gibbon had written, "Truth, naked unblushing truth, is . . . the first virtue of more serious history."[1] And in The Decline and Fall, he argued that "neither the belief nor the wishes of the fathers can alter the truth of history."[2] The latter judgement applied to his own belief and wishes as well as to those of antiquity. Fault in this respect was even more serious in the historian than in the believer.[3] Only a primary passion for 'objective' truth entitled anyone to be called an historian.[4]

Distinction between history and chronicle.-- Gibbon recognized that the collection of facts, even when acquired with an open mind and presented with strict adherence to truth, was not history but chronicle.[5] This collecting was the function of the compiler, not of the historian. Towards the compiler, Gibbon expressed an attitude of contempt.[6] Compiling required none of the discernment and penetration of mind so necessary to the writing of history. Thus while the responsibility of the compiler was simple, that of the historian was difficult.[7] The inference was that the assembling of facts, indispensable as it might be to the total task, did not constitute the prime function of the historian.

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1 Memoir A., p. 353.

2 II, 68.

3 "The prejudice of a philosopher," he wrote, "is less excusable than that of a Jesuit" (VI, 298, note).

4 In a fine passage, Gibbon argued that the true historian "does not display his conjectures as truths, his inductions as facts, or his probabilities as demonstrations" (Misc. Works, p. 643).

5 For other views of the relationship between facts and 'abstract truths', and between facts and 'ideas', as expressed in the writings of Coleridge and Macauley, see Appendix 8.

6 He argued, "The office of the historian is as honourable as that of a mere compiler is contemptible" (Misc. Works, p. 657).

7 "It is easily seen," he observed, "how difficult a task it is to choose the facts that are to be the basis of our reasonings" (Ibid., p. 657).

The need for interpretation.-- The historian must evaluate his materials and determine the 'dominant' facts.[1] His task was not to convey the available, detailed information on his subject, but to single out the significant occurrences, to show their interrelatedness, and to indicate the extent of their impact upon the historic process. In doing this, the historian must reduce the mass of documentary material by the use of criteria for determining importance and significance.[2] Gibbon assumed that these criteria were obvious, or at least that in his interpretation, he was expresing the thought of every rational mind. Yet the subjective element was undeniably involved, and Gibbon recognized it.[3] To this extent at least, the historian must be a philosopher.[4]

The necessity of immediate validation.-- If it was true that history implied the imposition of evaluation upon the materials, must not the materials in some sense have determined the evaluation?[5] Gibbon had no difficulty with this question. He insisted that if his construction were an hypothesis, it was immediately borne out by the facts. Never could the materials of history be required to fit into an overall pattern.[6] Always there must be a willingness

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1 Misc. Works, p. 655.

2 "Among a great number of facts," he wrote, "there are some, and these are the greatest number, which prove nothing beyond their own existence" (Ibid., p. 655).

3 "An enlightened age," he wrote, "requires from the historian some tincture of philosophy and criticism" (VII, 26, note).

4 "If philosophers are not always historians, it were to be wished that historians were always philosophers" (Misc. Works, p. 657). And he frequently referred to himself as a philosopher. See IV, 207; V, 269; VII, 86, 258.

5 This has posed a problem for later students of history, e.g., Ernst Troeltsch. See Appendix 8.

6 The Catholic critic conceded the truth of this: " . . . he [Gibbon] did not try to force the facts into a unitary scheme of development . . . ." (Christopher Dawson, Edward Gibbon, Annual Lecture on a Master Mind (London: Humphrey Milford, Amen House, 1934), p. 19).

"to sacrifice the most brilliant theory" if it was no longer fruitful in explaining the facts.[1] Thus while the historian must be a philosopher, philosophy must not lead him to lose touch with history.[2]

The importance of detachment.-- A philosopher-historian would be detached not only from the materials of history but from all partisan approaches to its interpretation as well. Eusebius had asserted that history was to be used to advance the interests of religion;[3] this was a violation of "one of the fundamental laws of history;"[4] Eusebius' History must not be trusted in those instances which could be seen to support his bias. A philosopher would be free of prejudice; his mentality rather was analytical, factual, cooly dispassionate.[5]

A critic has suggested that this 'coolness' sprang from feelings of aversion and antipathy:

> Und kalt, ja eisig wird die Luft, wo eine innerste Abneigung ihm die Feder führt, wo der Zusammenstoss von Heidentum und Christentum und das Eindringen des Christentums in den schon morsch gewordenen Körper des Reiches dargestellt wird.[6]

Against this, there is indication that the detachment applied also to attitudes of antipathy and aversion. As one defender has observed, it is a mistake to say that Gibbon 'hated' this or 'despised' that. "These are not the right words for the temper in which he shrugged his shoulders over the imbecilities of men."[7]

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1 Misc. Works, p. 651.
2 For contemporary views on this subject, see Appendix 8.
3 Eusebius, The Ecclesiastical History, cited by Gibbon, II, 144.
4 Ibid., p. 144.
5 "How calm," he observed, "is the voice of history compared with polemics" (VI, 386).
6 Friedrich Meinecke, Die Entstehung des Historismus (Berlin: R. Oldenbourg, 1936), I, 251.
7 J. M. Robertson, Gibbon on Christianity (London: Watts & Co., 1930), p. xxii.

At the root of Gibbon's attitude was something which may be termed 'temperament'.[1] Others might vicariously experience the anguish of man's life in history.[2] Gibbon did not.[3] Freedom from the misery and frustration of past existence was an essential element in his wellbeing.[4] And it was indispensable to the role of a philosophic historian. While the partisan of a particular cause might descend to a level where he could be affected by the hurts of humanity, the "calm historian of the present hour" must hold his place in the heights.

Further Assumptions About History

If the foregoing is an accurate account of Gibbon's general approach to his subject, it remains to indicate three overall assumptions which influenced his historical writing: his doctrine of human nature; his position on the unity of history; his attitude towards Providence.

Human nature.-- Critics have argued that an historian's theory of human nature determines his entire attitude towards history.[5] According to one modern view, the historian's sole concern

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1 For an exposition of the effect of temperament upon philosophic argument, see F. M. Cornford, The Unwritten Philosophy, and Other Essays (Cambridge: The University Press, 1950), p. 33, ff.

2 Heroditus contended, "Of all the sorrows which inflict mankind, the bitterest is this, that we should have consciousness over much, but control over little." The writer is indebted for this reference to Reinhold Niebuhr, Faith and History (London: Nisbet & Co., 1949), p. 176. But this consciousness failed to 'inflict' Gibbon.

3 "Our sympathy," he observed, "is cold to the relation of distant misery" (V, 284).

4 Gibbon wrote of "the salutary indifference of a statesman and a philosopher" (IV, 207).

5 Cf. Raymond Aron, Article on "The Philosophy of History", in the Chambers Encyclopaedia, a New Edition (London: George Newnes, 1950), VII, 149.

is with people, "with individual personalities, possessing self-consciousness, intellect and freedom."[1]

This assumption may be distinguished from that of the eighteenth century. Then the aim was to ascertain, by means of history, the general nature of man, the universal principles of human nature;[2] whereas today, many historians seek to recapture the unique mental atmosphere of each individual under consideration. They contend that in history as distinct from nature, universal principles do not apply.[3]

Gibbon was a son of his own age. He was not investigating uniqueness.[4] He believed that human personality could be analysed in terms of the operation of basic impulses which characterized the behaviour of people in all times and at all places. Thus the impact of a person upon history must be studied not in its particularity but as illustrative of a mechanistic or moralistic type. According to current thinking other than positivist, this was a capital defect of Gibbon as an historian.[5]

In more particular respects, Gibbon's analysis did not deviate materially from the typically eighteenth century attitude. Man was a rational being. It was his reason which distinguished

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1 Herbert Butterfield, Christianity and History, p. 26.

2 For statements of the eighteenth century view, cf. Basil Willey, op. cit., p. 183 ff. Cf. also Appendix 9.

3 The name of R. G. Collingwood is associated with this emphasis. Cf. The Idea of History, p. 205 ff.

4 Early in life, Gibbon had written, "I read Leo's Observations. . . . They are not ill wrote, but I think a capital fault of them is attributing more consequence to the particular character of man than to the general manners, character, and situation of nations" (Gibbon's Journal, p. 183).

5 But Gibbon would insist that the method of understanding human nature must be based upon experience and observation rather than upon 'a priori' assumptions about man's nature.

him from an animal rather than anything indefinable like 'spirit'.[1] But this rationality was properly exercised only when man's mind became free of all fetters. Reason and freedom were the two indispensable elements in making man truly man.[2]

Man had a moral core;[3] and the historian could write confidently of "those principles of justice and humanity which nature has implanted in every bosom."[4] The goal of human striving was not justice but pleasure. Personal happiness was the final purpose of life.[5] Thus self-love must be regarded as a characteristic of essential humanity, since it was natural that each individual would be concerned with the quest for his own happiness.[6]

This indication of Gibbon's positive position concerning human nature may provoke the question: did he subscribe to "the myth of human goodness which for liberal thought replaces the belief in divine grace?"[7] There is indication to the contrary. As he advanced with his inquiry, the historian found reason to suspect his earlier impression that man was a rational being; for the

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1 In a fine passage, he wrote of "the acquisition of knowledge, the exercise of our reason, and the cheerful flow of conversation," as "among the marks of a liberal mind," by which he meant anyone genuinely human (II, 37).

2 Gibbon commonly used the two terms in the same phrase along with 'humanity'. Cf. e.g., VII, 310.

3 "A prophet in his moral precepts," he observed, "can only repeat the lessons of our own hearts" (V, 371).

4 VI, 148. See also Appendix 9.

5 For a further indication of Gibbon's understanding of human motivation, see Appendix 9.

6 In the Essai, he argued that self-love might be manipulated to social ends; if people were informed of the advantages they may derive from others, "their self love will perform the office of sound reasoning and human nature is benefitted." And then would come the millenium: "Before, men were rivals, now they are brothers" (Misc. Works, p. 649).

7 This question was posed by T. S. Eliot, Launcelot Andrews, p. 62. (Cited by Basil Willey, op. cit., p. 98)

human mind could be guided by superstition as well as reason.[1] An element of irrationality in man gave to superstition perennial appeal.[2] Furthermore, mankind had been far more afflicted by sins of the spirit than of the flesh; ambition had often led to individual and collective madness.[3] Reflection upon these melancholy considerations was perhaps what prompted Gibbon to assert that history was "little more than the register of the crimes, follies, and misfortunes of mankind."[4]

Despite this factor of human rascality, man was subject to moral law. Collectively, this was instanced in the recognition of the folly of empire; the path of conquest led with inexorable logic to destruction. No matter how powerful the empire, the evil hour could not be averted. Individuals also were summoned to an ultimate reckoning for their evil deeds; and even while the world still aclaimed them, they might be haunted by the shadow of conscience and remorse. So constant was the operation of conscience that Gibbon observed, "I shall not be accused of superstition, but in this world, the natural order of events will afford a strong appearance of moral retribution."[5]

Coupled with this consciousness of a moral reckoning was a sense of the transiency of human life. Particularly were the

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1 Cf. III, 225. So common was this condition that Gibbon in one instance claimed that the function of the historian was "to trace the progress of the human mind from one error to another" (Misc. Works, p. 654).

2 Of the Armenians, he wrote, "They floated eighty-four years till their vacant faith was finally occupied by the missionaries of Julian" (V, 168).

3 See Vol. V, 242, for a full statement of his appraisal of ambition.

4 I, 84.

5 VI, 500. For illustrations of Gibbon's view on the folly of empire and ambition, and the fact of conscience, see Appendix 9.

follies of ambition underlined by the fact of mortality. All of human striving was under the same sentence; "the grave is ever beside the throne."[1] But so also was it beside the meek and the humble.

Thus while this reading of history supported the supposition that "Whosoever shall seek to save his life shall lose it,"[2] while it recognized that the will to power was self-frustrating and self-defeating, it did not suggest that the meek "shall inherit the earth."[3] One is led to see a pathetic quality in all of humanity as it moved across the stage of history. And the only ultimate epitaph was, "Vanity of vanities; all is vanity."[4]

The unity of history.-- The subject which Gibbon embarked upon as his 'magnum opus' was evidence that he had a grasp of the essential unity of history. The entire success of his undertaking in portraying the fortunes of the Empire over a period of nearly fourteen hundred years depended upon that Empire's existence as a continuous historical entity. Gibbon's problem was to trace the factors involved in the fall of Rome; but this search would be meaningless were not the first century and the fifteenth century in some sense intimately related.

Conscious of the importance of this consideration, Gibbon carefully noted that "in the lowest period of decay, the name of Roman adhered to the last fragments of the empire of Constantinople."[5]

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1 V, 258. See also VI, 253, and VII, 166, for further instances of this emphasis on the transiency of human life.

2 St. Luke 17:33.

3 St. Matthew 5:5. In another connection, Gibbon had written, "Persuasion is the resource of the feeble, and the feeble can seldom persuade" (VII, 171).

4 Ecclesiastes 1:2.

5 VI, 107.

And through the later chapters, he made comments which, while indicating the contrast between Rome in its Antonine splendour and its subsequent degeneracy, served to tie the entire phenomenon together as a single historical piece.[1]

But the disposition to posit unity in history, while in accord with the notion of the historian's responsibility to see connections where others saw isolated occurrences, was not without limits. One must not read modern 'developmentalist' insights into The Decline and Fall. Gibbon did not assume inevitable and absolute relatedness in history. He proceeded on the less metaphysical supposition that the historian was to point out causal relationships when and if he found them.

Critics have charged that although Gibbon grasped the overall unity of the Empire, he did not understand the intimate connectedness of its constituent parts. Thus his treatment of ecclesiastical history in separate sections has been regarded as evidence that he did not discern how closely interwoven such history was with political and social history.[2]

But other considerations suggest that he conceived of history in a more unified sense than has been supposed. What was termed his 'guiding idea' that "the historical development of human societies since the second century after Christ was a retrogression," may be cited in support of this contention.[3] Critics have agreed that he found history's ideal in the past; his gaze went backward to the golden age of the Antonines rather than forward

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1 Cf. e.g. VII, 237, 309, 338. The verdict of critics on this effort is given in Appendix 10.

2 Cf. F. Meinecke, op. cit., p. 248.

3 I, i.

to the glories of modern civilization;[1] he was haunted "by the lingering ghost of the Roman senate and people."[2] This seeking for the measure of historical development in the distant past indicates that Gibbon had implicitly recognized the fact of history's unity and continuity.[3]

But to what extent did he subscribe to the idea of retrogression? Granted that he regarded the Empire as a constantly declining organism whose sickness could not be arrested or overcome by any apparent remedies;[4] did he apply this insight to history as a whole?

The statement in his epigram that he had "described the triumph of barbarism" suggested as much.[5] The same impression might be derived from his glowing description of the Antonine era as the period in which the human race was "most happy and most prosperous."[6] All modern civilization would then be what Toynbee termed "an almost meaningless repetition of something the Greeks and Romans did before us and did supremely well."[7] Likewise, the contrast he portrayed between the enlightened leniency of ancient Rome and the later bigotry of superstition, did not suggest progress.[8] And his awareness that the arduous achievements of humanity might so swiftly be destroyed, did not indicate complacency.[9]

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1 Christopher Dawson, op. cit., p. 8.
2 A. H. Thompson, op. cit., p. 16.
3 This position leads to difficulties in classifying Gibbon as a typical historian of the eighteenth century. See Appendix 10.
4 Cf. I, xxxix.
5 VII, 321.
6 I, 86.
7 The writer is indebted for this reference to H. J. Blackham, The Human Tradition (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1953) p. 11.
8 Cf. II, 113.
9 Cf. VII, 86.

These considerations have led to the supposition that Gibbon joined with Swift in seeing history not as progressive amelioration, but as "a struggle, often marked by disastrous failures, to maintain the values fixed forever by antiquity."[1]

Against this conclusion are the passages which indicate that Gibbon had his own confidence in progress.[2] In fact, there were times when the historian of retrogression became extremely mellow about the general movement of the historic process. There had been setbacks; humanity had known no uninterrupted march forward. Yet the human race seemed to survive in spite of all. Gibbon often registered this assurance, especially in the later chapters.[3] So prevalent was the pattern that he was persuaded that here was a basis for predicting the future as well.[4]

The question may be raised: did Gibbon attempt to reconcile this view with his guiding idea of retrogression?[5] Critics have argued that the dual view could be explained by positing in Gibbon's thought two great peaks of cultural achievement, the Antonine era and the eighteenth century, with nothing of consequence in between.[6] Thus when seen from the former perspective,

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1 This analysis of Swift was made by Basil Willey, op. cit., p. 103.

2 His editor, J. B. Bury, acknowledged the fact of these passages, but claimed that Gibbon treated the idea of progress as a speculation. See J. B. Bury, The Idea of Progress (London: Macmillan, 1920), p. 223.

3 See Appendix 10 for a selection of these statements of assurance.

4 For statements of Gibbon's optimism, see Appendix 10.

5 A critic has argued that other figures in history were marked by a similar dichotomy. Cf. John Baillie, The Belief in Progress (London: Oxford University Press, 1950), p. 21. Cf. also Appendix 10.

6 Christopher Dawson, op. cit., p. 8; and G. M. Young, Gibbon, p. 95. But this interpretation has failed to do justice to

the movement of history was retrogressive; but when the eighteenth century was compared with what had preceded it, the movement was one of progress. Whatever the explanation, Gibbon was not conscious of a contradiction and did not attempt to defend the inclusion of both ideas.[1]

A conception of Providence.-- In Gibbon's general approach to history, was there any place for Providence? He did admit the fact of God.[2] Occasionally there was indication of a sense of the mystery and wonder of life.[3] And his treatment of ecclesiastical history was marked by references to the 'Great Author',[4] the 'Supreme Being',[5] and the 'First Cause'.[6]

But while Gibbon affirmed that God existed, this was of no consequence; the Divine was indifferent to the affairs of men.[7] History could be understood apart from any reference to Deity, since there was no evidence that God had acted in the historic process.[8] Rather was there something inexorable about the processes of time, something "which spares neither man nor the proudest of his works."[9]

Gibbon's little noticed appreciation of the Middle Ages. See Chapter Four.

1 Was this a common tendency among eighteenth century English novelists as well? Cf. Lois Whitney, Primitivism and the Idea of Progress (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Press, 1934), p. 8. Cf. also Appendix 10.

2 Gibbon often made non-ironical references to the Deity. See Appendix 11.

3 Cf. III, 264.

4 II, 8. 5 Ibid., p. 81. 6 Ibid.

7 Use of the term 'Providence' was always ironical and had no positive significance. Cf. e.g., II, 23.

8 Gibbon often noted drily that the Divine was deaf, or neutral, or powerless to reply to human appeals. For specific instances, see Appendix 11.

9 VII, 313.

Yet Gibbon also saw evidence of a control beyond man. The happenings of history were shaped into a pattern for which no one person or group of persons were responsible; nor, in Gibbon's view, was the Deity itself. He recognized that not infrequently good had emerged out of evil,[1] that in some sense, "history's apparent agonies are the travail of a new birth."[2] He perceived also that resources of utmost importance to the ultimate interests of humanity had been 'miraculously' saved from destruction.[3]

Gibbon did not move beyond these observations, nor did this view pervade The Decline and Fall.[4] Yet there were these instances in which a perception of destiny was unmistakably present. In them, by a strange and unconscious quirk, the historian had come full cycle; the Providence, which was rejected in its religious version, reappeared in a secular guise; and the complacency of the Enlightenment could be complete.

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1 Gibbon quoted George Adam Smith's contention: "The most salutary effects have flowed from selfish causes." See VII, 309. See also Appendix 11.

2 Benadetto Croce, op. cit., p. 93.

3 For statements of Gibbon to this effect, see Appendix 11.

4 A critic has claimed that this consciousness 'fluttered' around in Gibbon's book without ever taking firm hold. See F. Meinecke, op. cit., p. 251.

CHAPTER III

GIBBON AND HIS PREDECESSORS IN ECCLESIASTICAL HISTORY

A basic test of the skill of an historian is the manner in which he utilizes the labours of his predecessors. It is an axiom of historiography that the inquirer must be acquainted with the contributions of those who have covered his field before him.[1] Such utilization does not necessitate slavish dependence upon other people's findings. The competent historian constantly is exercising his own critical faculties to evaluate the extent to which his predecessors can be trusted.[2] Yet the results of previous investigation into an event or era must inevitably affect subsequent researches into the same subject.

General Features

Indebtedness.-- This constant use of predecessors is clearly instanced in Edward Gibbon's approach to ecclesiastical history. From the outset, it is evident that his ecclesiastical structure was established with the assistance of orthodox historians who had gone over the ground before him and whose references he

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1 Noteworthy is the fact that at least one recent history of the Roman Empire contains no reference to The Decline and Fall, nor any direct acknowledgement that the writer had made himself acquainted with this monumental inquiry into his subject. See M. Cary, A History of Rome Down to the Reign of Constantine (London: MacMillan & Co., 1935).

2 For contemporary views on the relationship between the historian and his predecessors, see Appendix 12.

faithfully followed and checked. Thus a critic has contended that when for a given period Gibbon had the research of a learned predecessor to draw upon and to direct his own inquiry, his treatment was noticeably stronger; whereas when he was deserted by his 'authority', the historical, if not the literary, quality of his narrative distinctly declined.[1]

Admittedly, the conclusion that "he felt his special genius lay in . . . working up into literary form what the researchers in the mine brought to the surface," was an overstatement;[2] whatever function he actually performed, Gibbon never 'felt' himself to be a compiler or polisher of the findings of others.[3] Yet the immense extent of his indebtedness to his forerunners was beyond question.

A proper procedure.-- Far from questioning it, Gibbon often acknowledged his dependence upon the "labours of those who have dug in the mine of antiquity."[4] In his view, this was entirely proper procedure. On the one hand, he recognized that the subject he had embarked upon was beyond anyone's ability to embrace apart from the most liberal use of modern as well as ancient guides;[5] that even with the aid of 'modern glasses', it was still hardly possible, for many periods, to cover all the available data.[6]

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1 J. B. Bury, I, x. Another critic supported his contention that Gibbon was only as good as his predecessors by citing his scanty treatment of the Byzantine Empire and by suggesting that Gibbon was without a Tillemont in this area of his inquiry. Cf. A. H. Thompson, Gibbon, p. 6.

2 J. B. Black, The Art of History, p. 161.

3 Cf. Chapter Two of this inquiry.

4 Misc. Works, p. 748. See Appendix 13 for further statements of acknowledgement.

5 He reasoned that many ecclesiastical writers, e.g. Jerome, Augustine, Chrysostom, had been so voluminous and yet their historical comments so occasional, that in order to detect these, the historian could not be expected to examine all their writings. Cf. Misc. Works, p. 748.

6 "In the consideration of any extensive subject," he

On the other hand, in some instances the materials were so meagre, or the reliability of the source so questionable, as to make it almost impossible to reconstruct an event or to fashion an acceptable narrative.[1] Under these circumstances, any sensible inquirer into universal history would want to take advantage of the concentrated work in a particular period which had been done by a previous writer.

Accuracy.-- Such borrowing must be accomplished, however, with the most scrupulous exactness, not only in noting the fact of it, but also in transcribing faithfully the sense or substance of the passage in question.[2] This guiding principle was evidenced in Gibbon's handling of Tillemont and Mosheim, to cite two of the modern ecclesiastical historians whose writings he employed.[3] Further support for his overall accuracy has been provided by the acknowledgements of critics of the most diverse schools.[4]

Preference for the primary source.-- Despite this careful use of the moderns, Gibbon was concerned always to consult the primary source. His aim, as he put it, was to draw "from the fountain-head."[5] And it was the critic's charge of improper

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contended, "none will pretend to have read all that has been written, or to recollect all that they have read" (Misc. Works, p. 747).

1 For statements to this effect in the History, see Appendix 13.

2 Exception: Gibbon did not always deem it necessary to acknowledge the fact that a predecessor had referred him to a primary source when he himself had seen that source. Such free use of common historical materials, he contended, was constantly made by his predecessors, and could be readily illustrated in their writings (Misc. Works, p. 750).

3 For an exposition of Gibbon's treatment of Tillemont and Mosheim, see Appendix 14.

4 A selection of these acknowledgements is provided in Appendix 15.

5 Preface to the Fourth Volume, I, xlvi. He added, "My

borrowing and of failure to consult the primary sources which alone aroused his ire.[1] In the History, the historian sought to meet these slurs as he pointed to "the numerous passages which I have seen with my own eyes."[2] This was more than a matter of personal pride. To Gibbon, there could be no history apart from authority, the best authority available.[3]

Occasional use of secondary sources.-- Gibbon did acknowledge instances in which he had not perused the original writings, and therefore could not be as authoritative as he would like to be. Sometimes, this could be attributed to 'inaccessibility';[4] or he had been unable to trace the primary source; or in exceptional cases he held that secondary sources were preferable.[5] But always, Gibbon claimed that he had noted this fact;[6] always, he had sought to be exact in indicating the extent of his reading and the source of his information. There are even instances when it appears that the historian enjoyed these acknowledgements and the integrity in himself which they reflected.[7]

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curiosity, as well as my sense of duty, has always impelled me to study the originals." For a critic's interpretation of Gibbon's motivation in consulting the primary sources, see Appendix 16.

1 This charge drew the one reply to his critics. See A Vindication of Some Passages in the Fifteenth and Sixteenth Chapters (1779). Cf. Misc. Works, p. 713 ff.

2 V, 103, note.

3 Gibbon was critical of the failure of other historians to cite the authority for their statements; yet he defended the occasional occurrence of the same practice in his own writings. See Appendix 16.

4 A critic charged that his claim to have examined all the original materials "referred only to those accessible in print." See J. B. Black, op. cit., p. 162.

5 For examples, see Appendix 17.

6 "When they have sometimes eluded my search," he wrote, "I have carefully marked the secondary evidence, on whose faith a passage or a fact were reduced to depend" (I, xlvi).

7 These admissions were common throughout his survey of ecclesiastical history. See Appendix 17.

General references.-- In explanation of those rare instances in which he had made a general reference, Gibbon contended that either he had recollected the sense of a passage which he had formerly read without being able to find the place,[1] or the idea he wanted to convey was the total result of a treatise he had quoted, thus making it impossible to confine "within the limits of a particular reference the sense or spirit which was mingled with the whole mass."[2]

But throughout the History, the aim remained exactness, and the consideration over-riding all others was accuracy. On this rested Gibbon's hope of winning and maintaining the respect and confidence of the critical reader.[3]

A Critical Attitude

The foregoing section has indicated the manner in which Gibbon intended to approach his materials and has suggested the overall accuracy and honesty which marked his work. But his performance must be evaluated not only by his intention and his integrity but also against the later development of historiography. As has been asserted, being accurate does not necessarily involve being right.[4] To what extent, by present day standards, did Gibbon exhibit a critical attitude?

Disposition towards scepticism.-- At first glance, the

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1 Cf. e.g., II, 16, note 38.

2 Misc. Works, p. 718. Gibbon also complained that upon occasion he had been required to adopt quotations "which were expressed with less accuracy than I could have wished" (Ibid., p. 747).

3 He expressed the desire that his readers might "consider me not as a contemptible thief but as an honest manufacturer, who has fairly procured the raw materials, and worked them up with a laudable degree of skill and success" (Ibid., p. 747).

4 J. B. Bury made this observation (I, x).

critical effort of The Decline and Fall might appear to be only a reflection of a general scepticism.[1] Particularly in Gibbon's approach to ecclesiastical history, an attitude of suspicion and mistrust was betrayed. At times it appeared that fraud and falsehood were the common rather than the exceptional occurrence. The historian's duty was to instil in the reader a mood of caution and the need to reserve judgement. This caution occasionally assumed the form of outright questioning, but the historian more often took refuge in tentative agnosticism.[2]

At the basis of this attitude was the historian's consciousness of the presence of bias in his predecessors. He was convinced that the orthodox writers had often permitted Christian allegiance to distort the dispassionate recording of the materials of ecclesiastical history. The tendency was to allow wishes to control beliefs, and beliefs to influence and control the writing of history. Constantly he was watchful for the operation of this factor in the works of his predecessors,[3] and insisted that it was wrong to rely upon a writer in findings which supported the writer's prejudice. So characteristic had these tendencies become in the reporting of ecclesiastical history that Gibbon concluded: "If the eyes of spectators have sometimes been deceived by fraud, the understanding of the readers has much more frequently been insulted by fiction."[4]

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1 "Criticism," he defined in the Essai, as "the art of judging authors and their works, what they have said and whether they have spoken truth" (Misc. Works, p. 642).

2 Statements illustrating the various shades of Gibbon's scepticism, together with comments by contemporary critics, are found in Appendix 18.

3 For examples of this watchfulness, see Appendix 18.

4 II, 322.

Limits to scepticism.-- This attitude of suspicion and mistrust might well appear to be anything but truly critical. Yet a certain amount of scepticism is an essential ingredient in any sound criticism.[1] And Gibbon's scepticism was not unrestricted. It never prompted him to question the supposition that the past could be reconstructed historically. It did not issue in a distrust of the historical inquiry itself. In this respect, The Decline and Fall does not contain the seeds of a modern 'sociology of knowledge'.

Gibbon was aware that scepticism could be as uncritical as credulity. He was scornful of a viewpoint which undermined the validity of any inquiry into ancient history.[2] He saw that if carried to its logical conclusion, scepticism would threaten the possibility of all knowledge. That would be absurd for the same conclusion must then apply to the insight of scepticism as well. "The most sceptical criticism," he wrote, "is obliged to respect the integrity of this passage of Tacitus."[3]

Further support for the contention that Gibbon's scepticism was not all-consuming is found in the faith which, after noting and discounting their 'bias', he placed in his predecessors. For the most part, he was prepared to follow their guidance with respect and confidence. Critics have contended that upon occasion his willingness to follow the lead of a predecessor was completely

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1 Lord Acton wrote, "The critic is one who when he lights upon an interesting statement, begins by suspecting it." Cf. Lectures on Modern History (London: Macmillan & Co., 1906), p. 15.

2 For instances of Gibbon's scorn of Voltaire's scepticism, see V, 160, note 121; and II, 268, note 26.

3 II, 92. Cf. also II, 128, note 146.

uncritical, and involved him in errors.[1]

Mistaken impression of vacillation.-- This combination of caution and confidence, of disparagement and reliance, has created an impression of confusion and vacillation. Even a friendly critic was led to observe: "His scepticism follows no rule, and leaves us asking for canons."[2]

Yet Gibbon's attitude towards his predecessors actually reflected more rationality than might at first be apparent. His assumption was that while the bias of a writer must be recognized and his conclusions discounted in those instances in which bias led him astray, still there were ways of establishing or challenging the authenticity of the accounts of a previous writer. By means of them, Gibbon believed it possible to avoid the Charybdis of complete credibility on the one hand, and the Scylla of a sterile scepticism on the other.[3]

Methods of Evaluation

The following criteria were employed by Gibbon to determine the trustworthiness of his materials: consensus; comparison; inference; the appeal to reluctant authority; the use of ancient manuscripts; his own historical sense. While it is necessary to consider the operation of these several factors separately, Gibbon

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1 Examples of Gibbon's 'faith' in his predecessors are given in Appendix 19.

2 Bury charged that Gibbon had uncritically adopted "the animosity which the chronicler [Constantine Porphyrogennetos], from ecclesiastical prejudice, exhibits towards Martina" (V, 185, note). And Robertson cited further instances of Gibbon's 'gullibility'. Cf. J. M. Robertson, Gibbon, p. 90.

3 That there were times when his critical apparatus failed him does not of itself argue against the existence of the apparatus. Cf. Appendix 20.

never specifically classified them as such. Rather were they assumed as essential ingredients of any adequate approach to the study of history.

Consensus.-- Gibbon frequently sought to marshal more than one authority in support of his account of an event or period.[1] Expressions such as, "See Eusebius and Lactantius," or "See Mosheim and Tillemont," are often to be observed in his notes. In establishing a consensus of ancient authorities, he was pleased to note that a modern predecessor had tackled the task before him.[2]

But he was also aware that the repetition of the same statement by many writers did not of itself add anything to its authenticity.[3] He knew that accounts could be improved upon in retelling, and took particular satisfaction in tracing stories back to their point of origin.[4]

Comparison.-- Gibbon thus understandably discovered that more reliable than consensus was comparison. Nothing brought him more satisfaction than "the singular felicity of comparing the narratives."[5] Especially when opposing 'biases' were betrayed by ecclesiastical writers, the stage was set for the 'impartial' historian to supply the necessary insight into what actually occurred.[6]

These differences between several historians' recording of

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1 Cf. e.g., II, 91, note 32.

2 Examples of these acknowledgements are given in Appendix 21.

3 Cf. e.g., II, 322, note 46.

4 For instances of this practice in Gibbon, and the apparent failure of a friendly editor to take account of them, see Appendix 21.

5 VI, 425.

6 E.g., "With the mutual aid and opposite tendency [of Protestant and Catholic scholars], it is easy for us to pose the balance with philosophic indifference" (V, 269, note).

the same event also impressed him with the need for cautious and careful weighing of their conflicting narratives.[1] And characteristically, he was prepared to acknowledge when a modern predecessor had performed this task for him.[2] But it might be expected that this would have happened since a part of the function of every historian was to compare and contrast previous accounts of an event.

Inference.-- The modern historian is not content merely to compile and contrast previous accounts. He uses one document to see new folds of interpretation in the other.[3] As a contemporary has claimed, the historian's task is that of interpolating between the statements borrowed from his authorities, other statements implied by them.[4] Thus it becomes possible to proceed by inference beyond information supplied by authorities to a reconstruction of the past which is more complete than the facts available without contradicting any of them and without involving anything "that is not necessitated by the evidence."[5] Like a natural scientist in this respect, the historian advances an hypothesis which seeks to explain and understand even when actual or complete confirmation is not possible.

This procedure was frequently illustrated in Gibbon's handling of his predecessors.[6] He strove to deduce from what they had

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1 Variations between his authorities were noted conscientiously. See Appendix 21.

2 "By comparing their unsatisfactory accounts," he noted, "Mosheim has drawn out a very distinct representation of the circumstances and motives of this revolution" (II, 11, note).

3 Cf. Butterfield, History and Human Relations (London: Collins, 1951), p. 13 ff., for a discussion of the method of historical inference.

4 Collingwood, The Idea of History, p. 240 ff.

5 Ibid., p. 241.

6 Gibbon argued that the historian was to extract "knowledge

or had not reported, conclusions which were valid even though not based upon evidence which was immediately given. Sometimes, he employed what had been reported for the purpose of discounting itself;[1] or he suggested that the 'silence' of a writer spoke most significantly of all;[2] or he showed how a predecessor's personal situation made it impossible for him to be a trustworthy reporter;[3] or he argued that the situation itself made it entirely likely that the account was authentic.[4] So triumphantly upon occasion did Gibbon relate his inferences that one feels that he regarded information thus derived as more reliable than that supported directly "by the suspicious evidence of ecclesiastical history."[5]

Reluctant authority.-- Closely allied with this method of inference was the appeal to reluctant authority. When Gibbon found a writer supplying testimony which seemed to go against his own bias, he was inclined at once to regard the account in a more favourable light. Thus he used Tertullian's testimony in support

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from credulity, moderation from zeal, and impartial truth from the most disingenuous controversy" (Misc. Works, p. 747).

1 E.g., "Yet the most rapid march from Edinburgh . . . to Milan must have required a longer space of time than Claudian seems willing to allow for the duration of the Gothic war" (III, 265, note).

2 He reasoned that from the ignorance of Pliny of any persecution, "we may properly conclude that in his time there were no general laws in force against the Christians" (II, 99). Again he suggested that the silence of Eusebius regarding the sign of the Cross in the sky "is deeply felt by those advocates for the miracle who are not absolutely callous" (II, 323, note).

3 E.g., "Lactantius was, at the time, an inhabitant of Nicomedia . . . it seems difficult to conceive how he could acquire so accurate a knowledge of what passed in the imperial cabinet" (II, 129, note).

4 Thus Gibbon argued for the validity of the circumstances reported for the elevation of Athanasius, by citing the Encyclical of A.D. 339, and by observing, "they would not have guaranteed a public falsehood" (II, 385, note).

5 II, 146.

of the fairness of Pliny.[1] He appealed to the authority of the Book of Acts to prove that the civil magistrates protected the first Christians.[2] And he sought to substantiate his contention that the early Christians were intolerant,[3] that they were frequently guilty of corruption and immorality,[4] and that some of their most cardinal doctrines were extremely doubtful,[5] by citing authorities from whom one scarcely would expect to receive that information unless it were undeniably true. Gibbon felt that this testimony was far more apt to be reliable than that designed to support the enthusiasm or the prejudice of an ecclesiastical writer.

Ancient manuscripts.-- Gibbon also attempted to evaluate the contributions of his predecessors in the light of the ancient manuscripts then available for study. It is true that noteworthy advances have been made in the analysis of manuscripts since Gibbon wrote.[6] Yet he was possessed of the modern temper to the extent of being impressed by their crucial importance,[7] and of attempting

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1 II, 87, note.

2 II, 89. He also asserted that "Tertullian, in his epistle to the governor of Africa, mentions several remarkable instances of lenity and forbearance which had happened within his knowledge" (II, 103, note). But similarly he observed that "Julian seems mortified that the Christian charity maintains not only their own, but likewise the heathen poor" (II, 54, note).

3 Gibbon quoted Justin Martyr's admission: "There were many among the orthodox Christians, who not only excluded their Judaizing brethren from the hope of salvation, but who declined any intercourse with them in the common offices of . . . life" (II, 12).

4 He cited Cyprian's statements about the corruptions of the early Christians, (II, 53); Jerome's admission that the law prohibiting the clergy from visiting widows was lamentable but necessary, (IV, 365); and the thirty-fifth canon of the council of Illiberis, which "provides against the scandals which too often poluted the vigils of the church" (II, 86, note).

5 Gibbon contended that Athanasius and Chrysostom "are obliged to confess that the divinity of Christ is rarely mentioned by himself or the apostles" (V, 103, note).

6 For a discussion of this development, see I, xii.

7 E.g., Gibbon argued that the testimony of Tacitus (con-

to make certain of their genuineness.[1] But it cannot be claimed that his approach was genuinely critical.[2] For while he readily noted that a predecessor was lacking in such evidential support,[3] he himself relied upon interpretations of the ancient texts which were actually only speculations.[4] It is true that in at least one instance, Gibbon's reliance upon an ancient writing was annihilated by a critic only to be reinstated by a still later scholar.[5] But this is of limited significance. Gibbon's own sense of inadequacy in this area is reflected by his cautious refusal in so many instances to be committed to a definite conclusion. A similar tentativeness was involved in his notations of alterations introduced by translators.[6] Thus it must be acknowledged that Gibbon was more concerned to buttress his contentions "by the consent of ancient manuscripts" than he was to make an extensive, critical study of their authenticity.[7]

Historical sense.-- Also utilized was Gibbon's own historical sense. In many instances, the real basis for accepting an account

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cerning the persecution of the Christians under Nero) was proved "by the consent of the most ancient manuscripts" (II, 92). See also, II, 140, note 172.

1 For examples of Gibbon's use of manuscripts, and the opinions of later scholars, see Appendix 21.

2 Gibbon was aware that his effort was superficial, that he had studied "the theory without attaining the practice of the art." See Autobiography, p. 138, 9.

3 He noted that "Mosheim seems to refine too much on the domestic religion of Alexander," without realizing that for some of the latter's activities, "there is no foundation than an improbable report" (II, 119, note). Cf. also II, 342, note 110.

4 His interpretation of the term 'Galilean' in the text of Tacitus is an instance of such groundless speculation. See II, 94.

5 Cf. II, Appendix 595.

6 See Appendix 21 for examples.

7 He was thus content when the reproduction of original materials was available in print. See e.g., II, 135, note.

was simply that the historian himself accepted it; it satisfied his 'sense' of authenticity; and behind him stood whatever dependability and trustworthiness he had been able to achieve as an historian. Constantly through Gibbon's notes run comments such as, "a just account"[1]; or he reported of a writer that the latter related "with great freedom and accuracy"[2]; or a predecessor was "rational, correct and moderate"[3]; the clear implication was that this had been the impression made upon Gibbon.

This 'historical sense' was not arbitrary. Gibbon had his own methods of confirming it. At times, he applied the test of consistency[4]; or he sought to establish the reliability of a predecessor by citing the extent of the latter's inquiry into the subject[5]; or he ascribed to the authenticity of an account because of the character of the authority who attested it.[6] Yet one feels that his own sense of history was operative, and that the arguments advanced to justify it really represented reasoning after the fact.

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1 II, 131, note.

2 Ibid., p. 127, note. 3 Ibid., p. 98, note.

4 "Neither of these writers," he observed, "seems to recollect how it [the Edict of Toleration] directly contradicts whatever they have just affirmed of the remorse and repentance of Galerius" (II, 141, note).

5 Gibbon thus supported his appeal to LeClerc for a contention about the Old Testament, by suggesting, "His authority seems to carry the greater weight, as he has written a learned and judicious commentary on the works of the Old Testament" (II, 23, note). But the fact that Gibbon gave his confidence to a predecessor at one point did not prevent him from withdrawing it at another: e.g., of a writer whom he held in high esteem, he observed, "Mosheim, in a particular dissertation, attacks the common opinion with very inconclusive arguments" (II, 50, note).

6 In citing the testimony of Tacitus concerning the persecution of the Christians under Nero, Gibbon asserted, "The character of the philosophic historian, to whom we are principally indebted for our knowledge of this singular transaction, would alone be sufficient to recommend it to our most attentive consideration" (II, 89, note).

Now this approach to history might appear to be extremely uncritical. Yet modern critics have come to recognize that it is the historian's own standards that are finally normative; no matter what 'authorities' he has been able to cite in support of a particular statement or interpretation, his reconstruction of the past can possess no more reliability than he himself has been able to attain.[1] Gibbon never articulated this more modern conception of the nature of historiography; but he assumed an 'historical sense' to be an essential element in the approach to his predecessors.

Criticism

Established errors.-- In some areas, significant shortcomings become apparent in Gibbon's treatment of his predecessors. Where, for example, he professed uncertainty and agnosticism, modern research has in many instances reached definite conclusions.[2] Where he relied heavily upon ancient writers some of these writers have since been thoroughly discredited.[3] Some problems which have troubled later scholarship did not concern him at all.[4] And he

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1 Current views on this subject are given in Appendix 21.

2 E.g., Gibbon contended, "We cannot receive with entire confidence either the Epistles or the Acts of Ignatius . . ." (II, 104, note). Bury, following Lightfoot, asserted, "The Acts are certainly spurious; the Epistles are doubtless genuine . . ." (Ibid., p. 104, note).

3 Bury wrote, "In the interest of literature [the inference is, not in the interest of history] we may . . . be glad . . . he used with confidence the now discredited Al Wakidi" (I, xi). J. B. Black reproached Gibbon for relying on Procopius' Secret History for the greater part of his material for the reign of Justinian, contending that Procopius "has been successfully impugned as a satirist, calumniator, and party witness" (The Art of History, p. 162). But this contention is now open to question; "The Secret History, which Gibbon accepted, and which was later discredited by Ranke, has now been rehabilitated . . ." (Michael Joyce, Edward Gibbon, p. 129).

4 Bury observed, "The difficult questions connected with the authorship and compilation of the Historia Augusta have

could be charged occasionally with utterly mistaken inferences.[1] There are also instances in which he combined testimony from different centuries in order to fill out his description of a particular period,[2] a practice which is not permissible by any present-day theory of historiography. Furthermore, Gibbon did not use all the sources available in his own time.[3] And, as has been indicated, it can be contended that his treatment of ancient manuscripts was lacking in scientific character; while he recognized the importance of a critical attitude in this area, his work actually did little to forward the arrival of such an attitude.

The verdict of critics.-- These considerations have led to a general disparagement of Gibbon by later students of the methodology of history. Croce, Collingwood, and even Bury himself,[4] have echoed "Lord Acton's well known judgement that the difference between historiography at the time of Gibbon and in modern times was

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produced a chestful of German pamphlets, but they did not trouble Gibbon" (I, xi).

1 Lightfoot e.g., uncovered "a nest of errors" in Gibbon's account of the history of the remains of Babylas. This fact was cited by Bury, II, 493, note. Again Gibbon relied upon the celebrated 'Edict of Milan', which, according to some modern scholars, never existed. See II, 310, note. And see III, 50, note 126, for an instance of Gibbon's 'misreading' of Orosius. Noteworthy also was the mistake which Gibbon made about the origin of the Scots. He argued against the idea of their emigration from another country, whereas "it is now generally admitted that the Scots of Scotland were immigrants from Ireland" (III, 45, note).

2 J. B. Black made this charge, and cited as an example Gibbon's account of the manners and customs of the Germans, contending that "in order to impart an artistic unity to the narrative, he skilfully weaves together the facts supplied by both Caesar and Tacitus, ignoring the changes that took place during the hundred years that separated the two accounts" (The Art of History, p. 163).

3 Thus Bury charged that Gibbon failed "to refer to Tatian's λόγος πρὸς Ἕλληνας which contains the best account of the Christian doctrine of demons" (II, 31, note).

4 The views of these critics on the 'unscientific' character of Gibbon's work are given in Appendix 22.

the same as the difference between astronomy before and after Copernicus."[1] The consensus has been that Gibbon was not simply 'dated', but that his date was unmistakably before the dawn of scientific history. If it could be substantiated, this contention would cancel any contemporary significance for Edward Gibbon as an ecclesiastical historian. But can it be substantiated?

A 'scientific' inquiry.-- It would appear that the problem is at least partially verbal, and centres around the proper meaning of the term 'scientific'. If by 'scientific' there is implied the great development of the nineteenth century which, as one critic has observed, "intensified the technical discipline and extended its application, carrying the sceptical or critical attitude into further realms of what had hitherto been too easily accepted as established facts"[2]; then obviously and inevitably, Gibbon was unscientific.

Likewise, if it is insisted (as the nineteenth century, in the person of such historians as Ranke and Acton, did insist) that it is possible to write a completely objective account of any historical occurrence, however remote, and that in such 'objectivity' lies the only conceivable claim to the status of a scientific inquiry, then again, with his historical 'sense' and his highly

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1 Cited by B. Croce, History as the Story of Liberty (London: George Allen & Unwin, 1941), p. 68. Collingwood described this idea of a Copernican revolution in the theory of history, as "the discovery that, so far from relying on an authority other than himself, to whose statements his thought must conform, the historian is his own authority and his thought autonomous, self-authorizing, possessed of a criterion to which his so-called authorities must conform, and by reference to which they are criticized" (The Idea of History, p. 236). But the present inquiry has indicated that this was precisely what Gibbon sought to do.

2 Herbert Butterfield, Christianity and History, p. 12.

individualistic approach to the labours of his predecessors, Gibbon must appear naive, uncritical, unscientific, and rightfully to warrant all the bitter censure that has been heaped upon him.

The impossibility of 'objectivity'.-- But the movement of historical thought in the first half of the present century has cast a shadow over these supposedly indisputable 'scientific' assumptions.[1] Increasingly, critics have acknowledged that in historiography the idea of 'objectivity' is an illusion; even the most scientific history is written under conditions which ties it to the individual's time and place; in our day as in any day, it is impossible to eliminate the human element.[2] The past, in other words, must always be limited by the kind of subject which seeks to understand it.[3] There can be no 'scientific' history in the sense in which the nineteenth century conceived of it.[4]

A justifiable connotation of 'scientific'.-- Far more defensible is it to regard as scientific any inquiry that is conducted with a passion to conform to the highest standards of intellectuality which that age has been able to obtain.[5] From this standpoint, it becomes possible to appraise previous historical efforts not only with greater humility but with far more fairness.[6]

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1 Cf. Fritz Medicus, "On the Objectivity of Historical Knowledge" in Philosophy and History to Ernst Cassirer (Oxford: The Clarendon Press, 1936), p. 137 ff.

2 For current statements of this insight and its implication for all of science, see Appendix 23.

3 Cf. J. Huizinga, "A Definition of the Concept of History" in Philosophy and History, p. 7.

4 "Ranke himself was to learn later," observed a contemporary historian, "that a considerable degree of human frailty is liable to insert itself into any species of mere reporting that is done by an eye witness . . . or even in official documents" (H. Butterfield, Christianity and History, p. 13).

5 Cf. Philosophy and History, p. 7.

6 A contemporary has written of "the usual depreciation by

One begins to see that while Gibbon lacked modern methods of 'determining' evidence, he was not lacking in a critical approach to what was established by his own age as evidence.[1] And while the fact that he failed to employ what was not known until a later age needs to be noted and advances in his subject properly acclaimed, this consideration ought not to impair his status either as a thinker or as a critical historian.[2]

What indeed can now be recognized is that due to the constantly changing situation with respect to evidence, history always has to be rewritten by each succeeding generation.[3] Such variations and advances do not jeopardize the scientific quality of previous historical inquiries. They only attest to the fact that every historian "renders his account in accordance with the standards which his education and Weltanschauung lead him to adopt."[4]

Thus the claim that "Gibbon was not backward for his day" was in this sense a superfluous statement, since that is the only possible basis for judging any writer in any day.[5] And the disposition of one age to castigate another as unscientific not only attests to its own arrogance, but also exposes that age to a

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every historical period of the one that has preceded it, with the view of showing its inferiority to the present" (Croce, History of Historiography, p. 261). Cf. also Philosophy and History, p. 225.

1 A critic has argued that "the enlargement of historical knowledge comes about mainly through finding how to use as evidence this or that kind of perceived fact which historians have hitherto thought useless to them" (Collingwood, The Idea of History, p. 247).

2 The same argument can be advanced in defence of all the great minds of history. See Appendix 24.

3 See Appendix 24, for contemporary expressions of this awareness.

4 Huizinga, "A Definition of the Concept of History," op. cit., p. 6.

5 This assertion was made by the friendly rationalist critic, J. M. Robertson, Gibbon, p. 91.

similar charge from a subsequent generation.

The implications of the 'subjective'.-- On the strength of this understanding of the subjective element and its crucial importance in the writing of history, it becomes possible to appreciate the validity of variations and divergencies among historians.[1] One begins to realize that "every present allows of a multitude of reconstructions of the past."[2]

Thus Gibbon's predecessors in ecclesiastical history followed a basically orthodox line of interpretation, but that fact in itself in no wise discounted the possible validity of their histories. Gibbon approached the same materials from a fundamentally different standpoint, and it may be argued that his findings were not automatically to be disqualified for that fact.[3]

This acknowledgement need not lead to a position of historical relativism. It is not a sign of scepticism. But it does suggest that any final designation of the meaning or significance of the historic process, or any portion thereof, exceeds the scope of the critical historian.[4] The historian is not thereby barred from advancing an interpretation based on his own premises even though these premises are not scientifically supportable.[5] This

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1 The validity of these variations is now commonly acknowledged. See Appendix 25.

2 Fritz Medicus, "On the Objectivity of Historical Knowledge," op. cit., p. 147.

3 Recognition of the propriety of this may serve to underline the partisanship of the Catholic critic's comment: "The infidel Gibbon . . . despised all that Tillemont revered and used the materials which Tillemont had so laboriously collected in order to explain away Christianity, and to rationalize the history of the church" (Christopher Dawson, Edward Gibbon, p. 11).

4 Did Gibbon himself exceed the scope of his inquiry precisely at this point? See Chapters Four and Five for the argument supporting this supposition. Cf. also Appendix 25.

5 I.e., while there can be no claim of a givenness of meaning

practice is not only permissible, but it is inevitable if history is to be more than chronicle.

But the fact remains that how the historian reconstructs his materials depends upon himself, upon the particular historical 'posture' which he decides to assume; and that 'objective' recording, as nineteenth century historians conceived of it, is a goal beyond the attainment of the 'human' inquirer.[1]

A conclusion.-- It is proper to conclude that Gibbon and his predecessors could offer variant and even conflicting accounts of ecclesiastical history without contradicting or refuting one another. And while these several interpretations might be appraised on the basis of their ability to explain all the facts,[2] one suspects that the adjudication could never be final owing to the absence of any real agreement as to what were the facts. Moreover, one wonders whether much may not be gained from reflecting upon more than one approach to ecclesiastical history.

This study has suggested that in the handling of his predecessors, Gibbon could be defended on three main counts: his accuracy, with negligible exceptions, was beyond reproach; he could not be accused justly of being 'pre-Copernican' in his historical method, since he made an unmistakable attempt to assess the trustworthiness of his authorities, no matter how inadequate by current standards; and the slant which he imposed upon their work was not to

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in history, the fact remains that only by advancing an interpretation based on his own premises, can the historian approach history at all.

1 Thus it can be claimed that the only truly 'objective' observer is God.

2 For other applications of this insight, and another view of the proper basis for evaluating interpretations, see Appendix 26.

be discounted either because it deviated from orthodoxy or on the supposition that it was incompatible with the function of a critical historian.

What it would appear that Gibbon failed to recognize was that his interpretation stemmed from his own individuality and from the age in which he lived, that it was not elicited by the findings of critical history itself. Thus a closer analysis of Gibbon's own attitude towards ecclesiastical history and of the factors which formed it constitutes the next major section of this inquiry.

CHAPTER IV

THE ATTITUDE OF EDWARD GIBBON TOWARDS ECCLESIASTICAL HISTORY

The Problem

One of the marks of a reputable and reliable historian is that while he may use his theme to develop a congenial thesis, he does not permit an animus to inspire and motivate his work.[1] Edward Gibbon staked significant claims to reliability as an historian. Yet in his consideration of the rise of the Christian Church, it has been the very general view that antagonism and antipathy influenced him and endangered his conclusions.

An indication of the indictment.-- Can this supposition of the critics be sustained? Did Gibbon betray a deep and settled grudge against every form of Christian belief? Has one encountered here "that great misrepresentation which pervades his History, his false estimate of the nature and influence of Christianity"?[2] Would Chapters Fifteen and Sixteen fall into the category of what Croce called "pseudo-history," whose "true purpose was not to discover the truth about the past but to express the author's feelings towards it"?[3] Must his sole significance consist in "leaving us the materials

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1 Bury cited as examples the indictment of the Empire by Tacitus, the defence of Caesarianism by Mommsen, Grote's vindication of democracy, and Droysen's advocacy of monarchy. Cf. I, ix.

2 Preface to Henry Milman's Edition of the Decline and Fall (London: Ward Locke & Co., 1888), I, viii.

3 Cited by R. G. Collingwood, The Idea of History, p. 204.

of forming a fairer judgement"?[1]

The admission of an enduring value.-- If these contentions require credence, how may the supposition that Gibbon exhibited astonishing accuracy be defended?[2] How could the claim that he had produced a work of enduring value be maintained?

On the other hand, if the allegations were not correct, what was Gibbon's attitude towards ecclesiastical history, and what were the factors which formed it?

The Historian's Intention

There can be no better way to begin than to examine Gibbon's own estimate of his attitude. How did he claim to conduct his survey? Was he conscious of "taking sides"?[3] Did he assume that his ecclesiastical history required an approach fundamentally different from the other portions of his History? Once Gibbon's view has been appraised, it may be possible to evaluate his actual performance and the extent to which he approximated to his own standards.

Antagonism incompatible with his conception of history.-- From the outset it is clear that Gibbon did not consider himself afflicted by any such antagonism or prejudice as was at once attributed to him. His aim was to write a serious, scientific history. Any uncritical yielding to predispositions would have been regarded by him as beneath the dignity of an historian and a betrayal of the most fundamental principles of his office. In the controversial

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1 Milman, op. cit., p. ix.
2 Cf. I, xii.
3 A critic has claimed that historians at the turn of the century "found fault with Gibbon not for taking sides against Christianity, but for taking sides at all" (Collingwood, op. cit., p. 146).

Chapter Fifteen, he declared that "the duty of an historian does not call upon him to interpose his private judgement" in religious controversies.[1] And in reviewing the composition of The Decline and Fall, he claimed that he had treated Christianity "without interposing his own sentiments," that he had "delivered a simple narrative of authentic facts."[2]

That none of these statements was strictly accurate is suggested even by some of the historian's own admissions. Yet it does point to a recognition of impartiality as a highly desirable aim in any scientific history. Regardless of the verdict of critics, Gibbon characterized the Fifteenth Chapter as an "impartial, though imperfect, survey of the progress of Christianity."[3]

Detachment a deterrent to hostility.-- Operative also was the desire for detachment which influenced all of Gibbon's historical writing and which was clearly in evidence in his discussion of ecclesiastical history.[4] Always it was his intention to stand apart from the process he was describing so that his reporting might be dispassionate and objective. Always he wanted to be above the melée of conflicting loyalties and enthusiasms so that he could be free of the suspicion of bias. Naturally this Olympian view might lead to other conclusions than those reached by the partisans of a particular cause.[5] Their censure would not disturb him. Throughout his History, Gibbon seemed to say: 'Whatever the opinions of partisanship, I have no personal stake in the outcome;

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1 II, 32.
2 Miscellaneous Works, p. 310.
3 II, 69.
4 Cf. Chapter Two of this inquiry.
5 Examples of this Olympian attitude are given in Appendix 27.

nor has scientific history.'

Such a disposition was scarcely indicative of a writer radically incensed against religion or even against ecclesiasticism. Rather does it suggest someone indifferent and aloof. Granted that the rationalist's contention that "with the exception of Bayle, he was the first student of ecclesiastical origins who combines thorough knowledge with perfect detachment of spirit" exceeds the truth;[1] 'perfect detachment' is never possible, and it cannot be claimed for Gibbon; yet it can rightly be asserted that it was not in Gibbon's nature greatly to become agitated over any subject, and that whatever hostility he did evince against Christianity failed to conform not only to his conception of history but to "that modification of ideas and sentiments which led him to perceive always in things, whether in detail or mass, their advantages as well as their disadvantages."[2]

Antagonism not present in early attitude.-- Still other considerations indicate that Gibbon's original attitude towards Christianity was not one of antipathy. This possibility has been commonly overlooked or even rejected because of Gibbon's frequent use of irony. As a consequence, sarcasm has been suspected in every positive statement he ever made on the subject of religion.

When, for example, at the occasion of his reconversion to Protestantism, he wrote, "It was here that I suspended my religious inquiries, acquiescing with implicit belief in the tenets and mysteries which are adopted by the general consent of Catholics and

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1 Robertson, Gibbon, p. 76.

2 F. A. Guizot's Edition of The Decline and Fall, (London: J. S. Virtue & Co., 1838), I, xii. For further views of critics on Gibbon's detachment, see Appendix 27.

Protestants,"[1] the usual practice has been to dismiss it as "the solemn jest," or "a statement in his most significant manner of innuendo."[2]

When in his Essai, he wrote, "The enemies of a religion are never well acquainted with it because they detest it, and often detest it because they are not acquainted with it,"[3] this has been regarded as youthful exuberance, the only significance of which was that it might be appropriately applied against the subsequent writings of Gibbon himself.[4]

His frequent attendance at church during the early years at Lausanne, his participation in Holy Communion, his recorded pleasure in following the New Testament lessons in the Greek language - all this has been deemed of little or no consequence.[5] "It is pretty certain," wrote the critic, "that even in regards to his frame of mind in 1754," any expression of piety was merely "the official falsehood it was naturally taken to be."[6]

Yet in the Autobiography, Gibbon pointedly referred to this period in these terms:

> Since my escape from Popery I had humbly acquiesced in the common creed of the Protestant Churches; but in the latter end of the year 1759 the famous treatise of Grotius (de veritate Religionis Christianae) first engaged me in a regular tryal of the evidence of Christianity.[7]

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1 Autobiography, p. 63.
2 Robertson, op. cit., p. 12.
3 Misc. Works, p. 659.
4 James Chelsum, Remarks on the Two Last Chapters of Mr. Gibbon's History (Oxford: The Clarendon Press, 1778), p. xiii.
5 A critic referred to Morison's "naive citation of a letter of 1763 on the 'edifying spectacle' of Sunday communion," as "quaint ground for reckoning its writer orthodox" (Robertson, op. cit., p. 14). But it would appear equally 'quaint ground' for reckoning him implacably antagonistic.
6 Ibid., p. 12.
7 Memoir C., p. 249. The underlining is the present writer's.

Must not some consideration of such specific utterances be included in a final estimate of Gibbon's attitude?

Absence of an emotional involvement.-- Of significance also was the fact that Gibbon's own religious pilgrimage was accomplished without permanent emotional scars.[1] In a letter to his aunt, he referred to "the different movements of my mind, entirely Catholic when I came to Lausanne, wavering a long time between the two systems, and at last fixed for the Protestant."[2] There is thus little foundation for the supposition of the German scholar, Meinecke:

> Aber ein starkes Erlebnis war es, und es zitterte nach in dem Interesse, das der Geschichtschreiber nunmehr den Dogmen der Kirche widmete. Eine solche Vertiefung in sie, bemerkt Bernays treffend, mutet sich nur die nach Erhitzung abgekühlte, nicht die von Haus kalte Indifferenz zu.[3]

Against this, the Autobiography had indicated that the conversion and reconversion as well as the mounting scepticism were essentially intellectual occurrences.[4] It does not suggest-that religion was a subject which had greatly 'heated' his emotions; nor does one gain this impression from his other writings.

A mistaken inference.-- The suspicion grows that there has been an inclination on the part of critics to view Gibbon's early attitudes and youthful experiences in the light of his later reputation as an attacker of Christianity, to read back into them interpretations which might account for the subsequent development of his thought, and to dismiss all utterances to the contrary as

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1 With reference to his conversion to the Roman communion, the historian recorded "a momentary glow of enthusiasm" (Autobiography, p. 48). He added: "I was seduced like Chillingworth and Bayle, and, like them, my growing reason soon broke through the toils of sophistry and superstition" (Memoir E., p. 297).

2 Autobiography, p. 66.

3 Meinecke, op. cit., p. 253.

4 Cf. Autobiography, p. 50 ff.

indicative of his ironical temperament. This is questionable procedure. Why may it not rather be assumed that when Gibbon assured Lord Sheffield that "he hadn't at first any idea of attacking Christianity" in the famous chapters, he meant precisely that?[1]

Searching for a subject.-- But if it be conceded that what Gibbon actually meant by some of his early utterances was not always clear, one is assuredly on better ground in arguing that the vast variety of ideas which the historian entertained for his main literary effort proved that at this period he had no great antagonism pressing within him.

The expedition of Charles VIII, the crusade of Richard I, the barons' wars against John and Henry III, the history of Edward the Black Prince, the lives and comparisons of Henry V and the Emperor Titus, the life of Sir Philip Sidney, and the story of Sir Walter Raleigh — all were at one time or another seriously contemplated and rejected.[2]

Such searching for a subject would scarcely confirm the notion that Christianity was weighing in on him as a phenomenon, the record of which he would relish the chance to set straight. On the contrary, it indicates that he had no special purpose to serve, no preconceived theory to support, no particular prejudice to overthrow.

Appreciation of Christianity

This initial freedom from antipathy carried over into the

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1 Lord Sheffield reported this statement in a letter to Wilberforce. Cf. The Correspondence of William Wilberforce, II, 323. The writer is indebted for this reference to Shelby McCloy, Gibbon's Antagonism to Christianity (London: Williams & Norgate, 1933), p. 47.

2 Autobiography, p. 118.

History itself. That is established by numerous passages which suggest that Gibbon was not insensitive to what he evaluated as the positive aspects of Christianity.[1]

Recognition of the merits of individual Christians.-- Of the divine "Author" of this religion, he entertained not a suspicion as to whether He had lived. The historian referred to Christ as One who "lived and died for the service of mankind,"[2] and Whose life was marked by "mild constancy in the midst of cruel and voluntary sufferings," by "universal benevolence," and by "sublime simplicity."[3]

Of Athanasius, he wrote in terms of the highest respect and admiration;[4] a fact which prompted J. H. Newman, a far from sympathetic critic, to observe that "Athanasius stands out far more grandly in Gibbon than in the pages of orthodox ecclesiastical historians."[5]

About another saint of the Church, Gibbon observed, "The youth of Augustine had been stained by the vices and errors which he so ingenuously confesses; but from the moment of his conversion

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1 In a letter, he wrote of "the purity of its original principles" (Misc. Works, p. 217).

2 V, 105.

3 II, 83. This must be set over against his comparison of Christ with Socrates, whose "life and death had likewise been devoted to the cause of religion and justice" (V, 105). "Not a word of impatience . . . escaped from the mouth of the dying philosopher" (V, 111, note). But the latter reference may be interpreted more as a defence of Socrates, whom Gibbon felt the Christians had uncharitably consigned to the outer darkness than as a deliberate disparagement of Christ.

4 II, 383 ff. Elsewhere Gibbon observed, "May I presume to add that the portrait of Athanasius is one of the passages of my history with which I am the least dissatisfied?" (VI, 212, note)

5 Cited by Leslie Stephen, Studies of a Biographer (London: Duckworth & Co., 1898), I, 185.

to that of his death the manners of the bishop of Hippo were pure and austere."[1] These words must be read in the context of a sharply critical appraisal; yet they do suggest that Gibbon was not oblivious to the positive qualities of this great figure of the Church.[2]

The constructive role of the Church.-- Not only did Gibbon recognize the qualities of individual Christians; there is also indication that he appreciated the constructive and conserving role which the Church played in the ancient world and even into modern times. It is true that he observed that by the eighth century, "the long night of superstition" had begun.[3] Yet he proceeded in many instances to qualify that judgement.

He saw, for example, that the successful establishment of Christianity preserved "a permanent respect for the name and institutions of Rome."[4] He perceived that by its demands for uniformity in doctrine and organization, the Church had been able to keep alive the feeling of a united Roman people throughout the world.[5] He discerned that after the fall of the Empire, Christianity acted as a preservative of European civilization and culture.[6] He contended that society was indebted to the monks for their attention to agriculture and to useful trades; and he argued that the ecclesiastical use of Latin involved the preservation of the "monuments of

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1 III, 430. For further instances of Gibbon's appreciation of Christians individually and collectively, see Appendix 29.

2 This fact has been recognized by reluctant critics. See Appendix 29.

3 V, 270.

4 IV, 86.

5 Cf. Ibid., p. 175.

6 Cf. VI, 172.

ancient learning."[1] He cited notable contributions made by the Church to learning in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries;[2] and he declared:

> The authority of the priests operated in the darker ages as a salutary antidote: they prevented the total extinction of letters, mitigated the fierceness of the times, sheltered the poor and defenceless, and preserved or revived the peace and order of civil society.[3]

Thus one does not find in Gibbon the unqualified rationalist contention that the Church was the cause of the cultural backwardness of the Dark Ages, and that the Renaissance rediscovered classical antiquity despite the Church.[4] With truer historical perspective, Gibbon maintained that Christianity was responsible for the retention of the tradition of ancient culture, and that it rendered invaluable assistance to Western Civilization by delivering Europe from the depredations of the barbarians.[5]

Exposition of Christian doctrines.-- Still further support for Gibbon's readiness to interpret Christianity apart from an active antagonism is contained in Chapters Fifteen and Sixteen.[6]

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1 IV, 86. See Misc. Works, p. 835, for Gibbon's recognition of the contribution made by the "monkish historians"; but against this must be set the whole of Chapter Thirty-seven with its devastating attack upon monasticism.

2 VII, 122.

3 VI, 465. For additional instances, see Appendix 30. In the face of the number of passages which can be cited, it is hard to account for the critic's contention: "Gibbon's religious prejudices rendered it impossible for him to understand the positive achievements of medieval religion and culture." Cf. Christopher Dawson, Edward Gibbon, p. 15.

4 Rationalistic contentions to this effect and an evaluation by contemporary critics are indicated in Appendix 30.

5 VI, 172. One feels that Gibbon was motivated here by the historian's instinct to recover the past, rather than to confirm what on the basis of his own view he expected to find. For a further instance, see Appendix 30.

6 His biographer contended that the two chapters contained a bias which was not present in the remainder of the work (J. C. Morison, Gibbon, p. 121). But there is ample evidence that the

Admittedly, he was not viewing the rise of the Church from anything approaching a believer's standpoint, and the exposition was not couched in terms which implied that the ideas expounded were true;[1] still this did not preclude an effort to treat the subject straightforwardly and objectively.[2] Such treatment was instanced in his presentation of the nature of faith;[3] it was reflected also in his discussion of the importance of witnessing in the early Christian community;[4] it was seen in his consideration of the question of what was the primitive model for the organization of the Church.[5] Clearly the irony and cool detachment in no way stripped his statements of possible validity.

Admissions of critics.-- These considerations have prompted noteworthy admissions on the part of critics. J. C. Morison suggested that "Gibbon became more just and open to the merits of the

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approach was the same throughout.

1 A critic's supposition that there was sufficient evidence to conclude that Gibbon was really a believer scarcely appears plausible in the face of the overall impact of the work. Cf. J. M. Macdonald, "Irony in History", Bibliotheca Sacra, (London: Trubner & Co., 1868), XXV, 550.

2 For an amazing literary effort based upon the recognition of this fact, see Appendix 30.

3 He described it as a "deep impression of supernatural truths . . . a state of mind . . . recommended as the first or perhaps the only merit of a Christian . . . the moral virtues . . . are destitute of any value or efficacy in the work of our justification" (II, 34).

4 "It became the most sacred duty of a new convert to diffuse among his friends and relatives the inestimable blessing which he had received, and to warn them against a refusal that would be . . . punished as a criminal disobedience to the will of a benevolent but all-powerful deity" (II, 8). From a Christian standpoint, is this not an adequate statement of the urgent summons to win others for Christ?

5 "The few who have pursued the inquiry with more candour and impartiality are of the opinion that the apostles declined the office of legislation, and rather chose to endure some partial scandals and divisions than to exclude the Christians of a future age from the liberty of varying their forms of ecclesiastical government" (II, 43).

Christian community."[1] Gibbon's most recent biographer has referred "to an odd sense of fairness which keeps cropping up . . . throughout his work."[2] And in a work significantly entitled "Gibbon's Antagonism to Christianity" and which was based on the premise of the historian's "implacable hostility" and his "bitter and subversive attack," Shelby McCloy declared that "he was imbued with an Englishman's love of fairplay."[3]

A necessary distinction.-- It is not being argued that the historian's own claims or the instances cited from the History or the reluctant admissions of critics are sufficient to establish that Gibbon was an impartial and unprejudiced appraiser of ecclesiastical history. Anyone well acquainted with The Decline and Fall is aware of a wealth of indication to the contrary. But it is contended that there is no basis for the supposition of a complete and all-consuming animosity to all things Christian as has been attributed to Gibbon.[4]

The Impression of Hostility

The manner of presentation.-- It remains to account for the almost universal verdict that the History constituted a major attack upon Christianity. The origin of this impression must be traced not to the materials which Gibbon assembled, but to the manner of irony and "thinly veiled contempt" in which, it was charged, these materials were presented. One has the feeling that had Gibbon

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1 Morison, op. cit., p. 127.
2 Michael Joyce, Edward Gibbon, p. 149.
3 McCloy, op. cit., p. 45. The critic also suggested, "It is by no means impossible that Gibbon let an objective attitude toward his subject influence and direct his personal opinions" (Ibid., p. 47).
4 For further views of critics to this effect, see Appendix 31.

approached the subject in a simple, direct style, nothing like the uproar would have resulted.[1]

This contention is supported by the fact that almost a century earlier (1684), the theologian Dodwell had attracted little or no notice when he questioned the historical basis for the belief in a vast number of early martyrs.[2] Yet when Gibbon took up the same subject and with remarkable thoroughness, followed the learned theologian's lead, the publication of his book provoked a heated controversy.[3]

Irony not applied only against Christians.-- The general aim of irony, it is commonly held, is to show the incompatibility between traditional moral standards and actual ways of living. Its method is the use of language conveying a meaning contrary to its literal import. This style of writing, which Gibbon claimed he acquired from the study of Pascal, met the demands of his materials and of his temperament extremely well.[4] Far from being limited to his approach to ecclesiastical history, the historian employed irony as a general weapon and wielded it against Jews and Moslems as well as Christians.[5]

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1 But Gibbon's irony was not obscure; he never sought to hide his real meaning, or to make the reader suppose he was sincerely defending the proposition he asserted. And there was a cultivated, refined quality about this irony which separated it from the savage onslaughts of polemical writers.

2 See II, 95, note, for Gibbon's reference to Dodwell's De Paucitate Martyrum.

3 Gibbon's carefully argued conclusion to Chapter Sixteen is a classic, and his findings have been sustained by later scholars. See Appendix 32. This suggests that it was not so much the argument as the irony with which it was advanced which constituted, in the Christian view, its reprehensible character.

4 Autobiography, p. 75.

5 For examples of his ironical treatment of non-Christian faiths, see Appendix 33.

But it was Christianity, a faith still subscribed to uncritically by the greatest portion of the Western World, which seemed to afford the weapon its real opportunity. Unhesitatingly, therefore, the historian brought the full weight of his powers to bear upon this much venerated institution, the Christian Church.

Application of irony to Christianity.-- Most commonly, the attack was conducted in cool and dispassionate fashion, and there was a classical, almost epic quality about the cadence and rhythm of the sentences.[1] Occasionally, the inference was less thinly veiled and came closer to open derision and contempt. But the indirect approach was by far the more characteristic and congenial to Gibbon. This was evidenced by the frequent use of innuendo by which detraction was neatly conveyed by the quick thrust of 'innocent' suggestion, or the same effect was achieved by disavowing piously what he actually implied. But never was there any doubt as to the real meaning which the historian intended to convey.

Now this treading lightly, ironically, sometimes even contemptuously, in the sacred precincts of religion could not fail to arouse resentment regardless of the validity of the main argument being advanced. Many who might otherwise have concurred with the historian's findings were alienated by this manner of treatment. And if Gibbon seriously supposed that Christians would receive, "without surprise or scandal," an inquiry conducted in this fashion, he soon had reason to revise his estimate of the allegiance of Christians to their faith.[2] The question naturally arises, why did

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1 Examples of Gibbon's use of irony and innuendo are provided in Appendix 34.

2 He finally did revise his judgement: "Had I believed that the majority of English readers were so fondly attached to the name

he resort to the use of irony?

Reason for the employment of irony.-- Defenders of Gibbon have argued that this method was forced upon him by the bigotry and intolerance of his time, that it was simply a way of protecting himself and his work against the possibility of persecution. J. B. Bury, for example, cited the law which made it a criminal offence to attack the established faith.[1] The inference was that had he felt free to state his findings directly, Gibbon would have done so. Another defender argued that it was a fine example of "religious unrectitude that an historian who would have been execrated had he openly declared himself a deist is still denounced for wearing the light armour of irony impailed on him by his critics."[2]

But the validity of this argument is open to question. The fact was that despite the formal law, the England of the eighteenth century practised tolerance.[3] It was an age of deviation from orthodoxy; yet there were only isolated instances of the actual persecution of intellectuals.[4] One suspects that something other than the impulse of self-protection motivated Gibbon.

More plausible is the supposition that his irony sprang

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and shadow of Christianity; had I forseen that the pious, the timid, and the prudent, would feel, or affect to feel, with such exquisite sensibility, I might, perhaps, have softened the two invidious chapters, which would create many enemies, and conciliate few friends" (Autobiography, p. 185). It may not be without interest that a different reaction was registered in Scotland. See Appendix 34.

1 Autobiography, p. xv. Cf. also Appendix 35.

2 J. M. Robertson, Gibbon on Christianity, p. xxi.

3 A study might be made of the number of laws still included on the statutes of a realm which are never enforced. Persecution occurs only when there is tyrannical government or else clear endorsement of such a policy by the majority of the population, neither of which conditions prevailed in Gibbon's time.

4 For an indication of Gibbon's gratitude for this fact, see Appendix 35.

from his detachment, from his feeling of aloof superiority to the interests and enthusiasms of average men.[1] And particularly did he feel aloof from the enthusiasms of ecclesiasticism. At any rate, apart from the threat of persecution, irony suited his underlying mood extremely well.

The presence of bias.-- While therefore Gibbon was not inspired by a specific animus against Christianity, he was not without his particular bias; that is, his irony slanted his materials in a way that was not required by the materials themselves.[2] But if it is true that ecclesiastical history cannot be approached apart from a predisposition regarding it, if what the historian finds in history is determined by what he brings to history, then this bias ought not to be held against Gibbon nor to detract from his work.[3] As a contemporary has put it:

> The historian may be cynical with Gibbon or sentimental with Carlyle. He may have religious ardour or he may be a humourist. There is no reason why he may not meet history in any or all of the moods a man may have in meeting life itself. It is not a sin in an historian to introduce a personal bias that can be recognized and discounted.[4]

What was important, insisted this critic, was that the bias be not confused with the voice of history.[5]

May it not be contended then that the bias betrayed by

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1 Cf. G. M. Young, Gibbon, p. 89; and Black, op. cit., p. 176.

2 This assertion may be set over against the critic's contention that Gibbon's irony was merely "the running comment of a lively and gifted intelligence, elicited by the impact of facts on the mind" (Ibid., p. 159). But "the impact of facts" in itself elicits no one particular type of response from the historian; on the contrary, in any approach to 'facts', assumptions are necessarily involved. Cf. Chapter Three.

3 Cf. Chapter Two of this inquiry.

4 Herbert Butterfield, The Whig Interpretation of History (London: G. Bell & Sons, 1931), p. 105.

5 Ibid.

Gibbon's frequent use of irony ought not in itself to disqualify him as a reliable ecclesiastical historian, especially since the obviousness of that slant should distinguish it, in the thinking of an attentive reader, from 'the voice of history'.[1]

Admiration for Rome

With the main external features of Gibbon's approach to ecclesiastical history thus indicated, it remains to trace the factors which combined to cause him to approach the subject in this way. One critic has dismissed the problem summarily, claiming that "Gibbon entnahm den Werken des französischen Aufklärers nur die antikirchliche und antichristliche Tendenz."[2] But this is hardly an adequate explanation.

A lasting enthusiasm.-- For one thing, Gibbon's attitude towards ecclesiastical history cannot be appraised apart from an understanding of his feeling for the ancient Empire, the one significant and lasting enthusiasm of his life.[3] This appreciation was evidenced at an early age.[4] Subsequent reading and writing ran true to this initial interest.[5] The attachment grew with an early visit (1764) "to the country of Scipio and the city with its

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1 But that obviousness was no greater in Gibbon than in later Christian historians. See Appendix 36.

2 Eduard Fueter, Geschichte der Neueren Historiographie (Berlin: R. Oldenbourg, 1911), p. 369.

3 A critic correctly observed, "Although he owed so much to the thought and culture of the Enlightenment, his history stands apart from the typical products of the eighteenth century philosophical movement. He was not the disciple of Voltaire; he was the last of the Humanists" (Dawson, op. cit., p. 7).

4 Cf. Autobiography, p. 32 ff. The earliness of the impression together with the pervasiveness of the influence challenges the critics' surmise that the enthusiasm was merely the reflection of Enlightenment values. Cf. Appendix 37.

5 Almost all of his writings reflected this interest. See Appendix 37.

palaces, temples and triumphal arches."[1]

The fruition of this admiration came in the First Volume of The Decline and Fall. There, with unforgetable eloquence, the historian of the Roman Empire revealed the depth of the impression that Empire had made upon the man.[2] Nor did Gibbon regard Rome's fate to be restricted to antiquarian interest. He proudly referred to a "revolution which will ever be remembered, and is still felt by the nations of the earth."[3] Rome's tolerance,[4] its orderliness,[5] its cosmopolitanism,[6] its universal peace[7] — all these impressed Gibbon as marks of a system of government which could ill afford to vanish from the face of the earth.

Resultant errors.-- Such open admiration might be expected to result in clear instances of partiality, which it did.[8] One feels that it was a preference for all things Roman which prompted Gibbon to attempt to explain Nero's persecution of the Christians in 64 A.D., the result being one of his few clear mistakes of conjecture.[9] Again, it can be contended that Gibbon did not adequately appraise all aspects of the Antonine era, especially those which

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1 II, 27.

2 For instances of Gibbon's admiration of the Empire, see Appendix 37.

3 I, 1.

4 "According to the maxims of universal toleration, the Romans protected a superstition which they despised" (II, 4). Cf. also I, 31.

5 Cf. I, 56 ff. It has been contended that this appreciation of the orderliness of the Antonine period with its despotism was inconsistent with his recognition of the evils of imperialism. Cf. Appendix 37. Cf. also the later argument of the present Chapter.

6 Cf. I, 59 ff.

7 Cf. Ibid., p. 47 ff.

8 Gibbon often was very aware of his partiality. See Appendix 38.

9 He argued that confusion may have resulted from two possible meanings of the term "Galilean" in the testimony of Tacitus. See Appendix 38.

would not fit into his picture of a golden age.[1]

Confirmation of critics.-- But in the main, his designation of the period as that in which the human race was "most happy and most prosperous," a judgement which at first might appear so uncritical and unhistorical, has found surprising confirmation among scholars of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Lord Bryce and Arnold Toynbee, for example, have reached amazingly similar conclusions.[2] Whatever the degree of accuracy of these estimates, there can be little question but that Gibbon found sufficient therein to arouse his deep admiration, and that this admiration influenced the entire outlook of his maturity.

Obliviousness to his own era.-- Gibbon's preoccupation with Rome was further instanced by the difficulty, on any other supposition, of accounting for his attitude towards his contemporary world. Must it not be assumed that it was his involvement in ancient times which made him so insensitive to his own?

At any rate, apart from this consideration, his obliviousness to the pressing political problems of his age would be hard to reconcile with the keenness of his analysis of the historic process. His attitude towards Parliament, the American Colonial question, and the French Revolution can only be adequately approached on the assumption that his most pressing interest was not in the eighteenth century.[3]

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1 It has been suggested that the Roman world of the second century did not present the impression of universal toleration and of freedom from "internal strains" that Gibbon had led the reader to assume. See Appendix 38.

2 Descriptions of the period by Bryce, Toynbee and Butterfield are quoted in Appendix 39. For a dissenting estimate of the era, cf. Stephen Neill, The Christian Society (London: Nisbet & Co., 1952), p. 33 ff.

3 For an exposition of Gibbon's lack of adequacy and of

Basis for a claim to fame.-- One other consideration may be cited in this survey of the extent of Gibbon's attachment to Roman antiquity. Gibbon recognized that it was upon the greatness of Rome that his own claim to fame rested. At the very outset of his career as an historian, this confidence was reflected.[1] And at the end, the fact that he made no further effort to launch upon another serious work, even though he finished The Decline and Fall while still in the prime of life, suggests that he regarded the History as his supreme effort. Herein also was the reason for writing the Autobiography. In it, there was no pointing to Gibbon as an independent personality. The purpose was to explain how The Decline and Fall had come to be written, to open up to posterity the mind of the historian of the Roman Empire.[2]

Thus it is scarcely surprising that in his will of 1788, the historian wrote, "Shall I be accused of vanity if I add that a monument is superfluous?"[3] This identification of self with subject has prompted critics to sneer that Gibbon came to believe that he was the Roman Empire.[4]

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insight in these three areas, and an indication of the censure of critics, See Appendix 40.

1 "The subject is curious," he wrote, "and never yet treated as it deserves; and . . . during some years it has been in my thoughts, and even under my pen. Should the attempt fail, it must be by the fault of the execution" (Misc. Works, p. 270). Again, in describing the period of waiting for the release of the first volume, he registered his confidence: "I had chosen an illustrious subject . . . familiar to the schoolboy and the statesman" (Autobiography, p. 180).

2 He confided that this mind might one day be familiar "to the grandchildren of those who are yet unborn" (Ibid., p. 219). Gibbon also implied that as Fielding justified his ancestors, the Habsburgs, by his great literary work, so Gibbon's own ancestors would be remembered for their connection with the historian of the Roman Empire (Ibid., p. 4). (Gibbon was mistaken about the connection between Fielding and "the Habsburgs.")

3 Autobiography (Murray's Edition), p. 421.

4 A critic reported: "A wit said . . . that he did not know

The Church and the Empire

This was the allegiance of the mind which approached the subject of ecclesiastical history. From the start, it had become clear to Gibbon that the decline of Rome had been accompanied step by step by the rise of Christianity. That conviction was visualized in the circumstances of the setting in which his great 'inspiration' had come.[1]

Ever after, Gibbon saw Christianity as an institution which, with its chant of vespers and its barefooted monks, had been substituted for the magnificent ceremonies of the old worship of Jupiter and the legendary heroes of antiquity.

> On the same spot [where occurred the Neronian martyrdoms] a temple . . . has been erected by the Christian Pontiffs, who . . . have succeeded to the throne of the Caesars . . . and extended their spiritual jurisdiction from . . . the Baltic to . . . the Pacific Ocean.[2]

The Empire's outlook.-- Thus it is necessary always to recall that Gibbon approached Christianity from the standpoint of the ancient Empire as well as from the assumptions of eighteenth century Enlightenment. It was the Empire's view that he was attempting to articulate when he wrote: "The religious concord of the

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the difference between himself and the Roman Empire" (Walter Bagehot, Literary Studies, I, 188).

1 "It was at Rome," he wrote in a frequently quoted passage, "on the 15th of October, 1764, as I sat musing amidst the ruins of the Capitol, while the barefooted friars were singing vespers in the Temple of Jupiter, that the idea of writing the decline and fall of the city first started to my mind" (Autobiography, p. 160).

2 II, 92. Between these two contending forces, Gibbon left little question as to his personal preference: "Our early studies allow us to sympathize in the feelings of a Roman" (VII, 313, note). In a letter to Sheffield, he added, "The primitive church, which I have treated with some freedom, was itself at that time an innovation, and I was attached to the old pagan establishment" (Misc. Works, p. 134).

> world was principally supported by . . . reverence for traditions and ceremonies. It might be expected that they would unite with indignation against any sect of people which should separate itself from the communion of mankind, and, claiming the exclusive possession of divine knowledge, should disdain every form of worship, except its own as impious and idolatrous.[1]

And he expressed what must have been the attitude of the average Roman citizen when he demanded: "What must be the fate of the Empire attacked on every side by the barbarians, if all mankind should adopt the pusillanimous sentiments of the new sect?"[2]

Charge of undue interest.-- But this disposition in Gibbon to be the spokesman of the Empire over against Christianity need not suggest that he was preoccupied with the rise of Christianity in a way that was alien to the real purpose of his undertaking: i.e., the description of the decline and fall of Rome. This charge has often been advanced by ecclesiastical critics. The claim is that the ecclesiastical aspect of his History held for Gibbon a fascination out of proportion to its place in the totality of the work.[3]

Justification for the inquiry.-- Gibbon's purpose was to analyse all that imperilled Rome. This was the thread which unified his work. That unity hinged not alone upon the unity of the Empire as a continuous historical entity but also upon the inclusion of only those elements which contributed to Rome's decline and fall.[4]

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1 II, 77. A theologian quoted this statement as expressing the attitude of classical antiquity towards Christianity. Cf. H. Richard Niebuhr, Christ and Culture (London: Faber & Faber, 1952), p. 23.

2 II, 41.

3 See e.g., Thompson, op. cit., p. 5.

4 One might argue that it was within the scope of Gibbon's inquiry to analyse the new situation which emerged as Rome declined.

Gibbon applied this insight to ecclesiasticism when he stated his purpose to review "the objects of ecclesiastical history, by which the decline and fall of the Roman empire were materially affected."[1] And as though he were sensitive to the possible suggestion that he was excessively interested in the subject of ecclesiasticism, he often repeated the justification for his inquiry.[2]

A subordinate subject.-- In point of fact, ecclesiastical exposition was kept subordinate to the main purpose of tracing the decline and fall of a political empire.[3] This is suggested by the limited space allotted to Christianity in the context of the entire History. Of possible significance also was the fact that the historian indicated relief that it was not necessary, for some periods, to become involved in the intricacies of ecclesiasticism.[4]

An inseparable connexion.-- But Gibbon could not escape the recognition that the rise of the Church and the fall of the Empire were intimately if not inseparably associated. When in his epigram he contended, "I have described the triumph of barbarism and religion,"[5] the inference was that this was the reverse side of the decay and fall of Rome. And in the oft quoted words of the Autobiography, this idea was made more than an inference: "As I believed and as I still believe, that the propagation of the Gospel, and the triumph of the Church, are inseparably connected with the decline of the Roman monarchy, I weighed the causes and effects

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See Appendix 41.

1 V, 261.

2 For statements to this effect, see Appendix 41.

3 About his treatment of the Church and the Empire, he wrote, "I have considered the former as subservient only and relative to the latter" (V, 261).

4 For instances, see Appendix 41.

5 III, 321.

of the revolution . . ."[1] This statement can be considered a further effort to justify the extent of his inquiry into the history of the Church.

The surmise of critics.-- But whether Gibbon understood this close and inseparable connexion between the two phenomena as a causal connexion remains to be ascertained. This has been the common surmise of critics.[2] With few exceptions, they have argued that Gibbon's recognition of the bitter hostility between the Church and the Empire coupled with the statement about "the triumph of barbarism and religion" could point to no other conclusion.[3]

This conclusion would identify Gibbon with an historic judgement which has been thoroughly discredited by subsequent scholarship. Every present day student of the question concurs in the recognition that Christianity was not the cause of the fall of Rome.[4] And since Gibbon's 'mistake' must be regarded as a crucial characteristic of the whole History, his entire work would be discredited as a consequence. But did Gibbon subscribe to this supposition?

There are two major considerations which indicate that this was not his view: He nowhere explicitly connected the two phenomena causally; his History contained clear attempts to analyse the actual causes of the Empire's decline and fall.

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1 Autobiography, p. 172.

2 The conclusions of J. M. Robertson, A. H. Thompson, Shelby McCloy, Arnold Toynbee, Algernon Cecil, F. A. Ridley, and J. B. Bury are quoted in Appendix 42.

3 J. B. Black and F. Meinecke have dissented from the common view. See Appendix 42.

4 The verdict has not been unanimous; Bury dissented. Cf. J. B. Bury, A History of the Later Roman Empire (London: Macmillan & Co., 1889), p. 1. But for a later reversal in Bury's thought, see Appendix 42.

No unqualified causal connexion asserted.-- There is ample evidence in the History that Gibbon stopped short of asserting a clear, causal relationship between the rise of the Church and the fall of the Empire. Often he hinted at this possibility; yet invariably he introduced doubt as to the propriety of it. Thus he observed, "As the happiness of a future life is the great object of religion we may hear without surprise or scandal that the introduction, or at least the abuse, of Christianity had some influence on the decline and fall of the Roman Empire."[1]

Of equally equivocal nature was the reflection, "half philosophical and half superstitious, that the province which had been ruined by the bigotry of Justinian was the one through which the Moslems had entered the eastern empire."[2] And even his famous statement, "I have described the triumph of barbarism and religion" was also qualified: "I can only resume . . . their real or imaginary connexion with the ruin of ancient Rome."[3]

When more directly he did assert a causal relationship, Gibbon provided in the next phrase or sentence, a counter suggestion which impugned the full impact of the original assertion. Thus he declared that "if the decline of the Roman empire was hastened by the conversion of Constantine, his victorious religion broke the violence of the fall, and mollified the ferocious temper of the conquerors."[4] Again, he observed that ecclesiastical schism by "alienating her most useful allies . . . precipitated the decline and fall;"[5]

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1 IV, 175. The underlining throughout this section is the present writer's.
2 V, 145.
3 VII, 321.
4 IV, 175.
5 VI, 381.

but then he argued that the real causes of the schism were not religious or ecclesiastical but "political and temperamental."[1]

Finally, in citing the causes of the fall of the city of Rome, Gibbon listed the ignorance of the times, the hostile attacks of barbarians and Christians, the use and abuse of materials, and the domestic quarrels of the Romans;[2] but in considering these causes separately he discounted the hostile attacks of barbarians and Christians, claiming that they did not count for much in the fall of the city after all.[3]

These careful allowances suggest reasonable doubt not only as to whether Gibbon believed that Christianity was the chief cause of the decline of the Empire, but also as to whether he ever linked them causally at all. At any rate, this inquiry would indicate that he never did so unqualifiedly. But how then must the statement, "I have described the triumph of barbarism and religion," be interpreted?

A critic has advanced a reasonable explanation, arguing that this was Gibbon's way of intimating that "he has traced the history of Gothic conquests and the rise of the Church."[4] This process paralleled the decline and fall of the Empire. That Gibbon regarded the two developments intimately to be interwoven, and that where there had been a political empire, now there was a spiritual-temporal empire, a replacement which aroused the historian's strong resentment — of all this there can be no question.

But there is no confirmation in his History for the

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1 VI, 386.
2 VII, 317.
3 Ibid., p. 322.
4 Black, op. cit., p. 170.

supposition that he regarded the one as the cause of the other. Nor may it be without significance that in his early Essai, Gibbon had asserted: "It requires an extraordinary judgement to discern whether two things, which always exist together, and appear intimately connected, do not . . . owe their origin to each other."[1]

Inquiry into actual causes.-- The other consideration which challenges the traditional view is that Gibbon inquired into the actual causes of the fall of Rome.[2] He did so in such fashion as to render scant need to posit the Church as a fundamental factor in the process.

Gibbon actually advanced not one but many causes of the Empire's decline.[3] In Chapter Two, he attributed it to the long peace and the uniform government which reduced men's minds to the same level, extinguished the fire of genius, dissipated the military spirit.[4] In Chapter Twenty-Seven, he suggested that the real cause was the luxury which resulted from the long peace.[5] But this was not satisfactory, since he saw that luxury and effeminacy were not so much a cause as an effect of the political breakdown. In Chapter Thirty-Five, he hinted at an economic explanation, citing the unequal distribution of taxation and arguing that the evasions of the wealthy placed an intolerable burden upon the remainder of the population.[6]

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1 Misc. Works, p. 669.

2 For instances of the failure of critics to take account of this fact, see Appendix 43.

3 This 'zeal' to uncover causes produced one of the few instances of contradiction in the History. See Appendix 43.

4 I, 62. On this insight, a German scholar commented: "Es schwingt in diesem bewegenden Urteil schon etwas mit, was über das moralistische und mechanistische Denken der Aufklärung hinausgeht" (Meinecke, op. cit., p. 250).

5 III, 196.

6 Ibid., p. 507.

But as he proceeded with his survey, Gibbon discerned that far more important than any of these particular causes was a factor underlying them all. This factor he saw to be inherent in the rise and success of the Empire itself.[1] "The decline of Rome," he wrote, "was the natural and inevitable effect of immoderate greatness. Prosperity ripened the principle of decay."[2] In other words, not the collapse of a military system but the decline of ordinary citizenship lay at the bottom of the difficulty. The historian sadly concluded that nothing could arrest the downward trend; "if all the Barbarian conquerors had been annihilated in the same hour, their total destruction would not have restored the empire of the West."[3]

Inadequacy of the inquiry.-- Gibbon's analysis of causes has been criticized on two main counts: It was superficial; it was not systematic. First, it has been claimed that he did not carry his inquiry far enough; he neglected sufficiently to analyse many factors which he did hint at such as depopulation, the decay

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1 Cf. Misc. Works, p. 669. But a critic has complained that Gibbon did not recognize that the Empire itself was "a monumental symptom" of the "far-advanced disintegration" of Hellenic Civilization. Cf. Arnold Toynbee, The Study of History, abr. by Somervell (London: Oxford University Press, 1947), p. 261. This panoramic insight may not be without value, but since the Empire was not established formally until the time of Augustus, Gibbon may be pardoned for not discerning the beginning of its 'breakdown' where Toynbee placed it, at the outbreak of the Peloponnesian War in 431 B.C. Cf. Ibid., p. 262.

2 IV, 173. The theory of biological development, in which the state is born, matures, and finally dies, was thus hinted at by Gibbon, but he did not state it directly.

3 III, 507. Did he realize that the path of empire, expanding by conquest, led inevitably to resistance, mounting hatred and eventual overthrow? Cf. John Macmurray's well-argued thesis in Conditions of Freedom (London: Faber & Faber, 1950), p. 64 ff. Cf. also Appendix 44.

of agriculture, fiscal oppression, and the general psychological decline produced by despotism; he did not place these factors "beneath the deeper sky of social evolution."[1]

Secondly, it has been asserted that while Gibbon saw all the major elements involved, he only 'colligated' and never 'synthesized' either the evidence or his own reflections.[2] His great fault, according to a biographer, was that he left his conclusions at "loose ends"; he never brought his causal considerations "to a luminous point."[3]

But these criticisms may be sustained without affecting the basic contention; that Gibbon's concern to trace the actual causes of the decline and fall of Rome, no matter how unacceptable by present-day standards, made it questionable that he could have considered Christianity the prime factor in that process.

The balance of help and hindrance.-- What role did Gibbon assign to Christianity in the drama of Rome's decay and fall? As has been indicated, he asserted that in some respects, Christianity exercised a conserving influence. But this was balanced in Gibbon's view by the recognition that it was a disturbing factor as well. "In the fever of the times," he wrote, "the sense or rather the sound of a syllable was sufficient to disturb the peace of an empire."[4]

One is led to believe that the effect was not so much one of active undermining as it was that of steady, slow attrition. In

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1 This was Leslie Stephen's phrase, cited by Black, op. cit., p. 166.
2 J. M. Robertson, Gibbon, p. 10.
3 Morison, Gibbon, p. 133.
4 V, 139.

Charlemagne's reign, for example, the historian cited "the canals of communication, which could have revivified an empire," — and observed that "more cost was wasted on the structure of a cathedral."[1] Likewise the holy wars appeared to Gibbon to have checked, rather than forwarded, the maturity of Europe.[2] And from Rome's standpoint, the real significance of monasticism was that it siphoned off manpower, and multitudes of monks were lost to the defence of the Empire.[3]

On the strength of such passages, critics have contended that Gibbon inferred that Christianity was not a preservative but a dissolvent of all ancient civilization.[4] Yet in his "General Observations on the Fall of the Roman Empire in the West," the historian insisted on citing the balance of help and hindrance contributed by Christianity. He argued that while the active virtues of society were discouraged, and the last remains of the military spirit were buried in the cloister, and a large portion of public and private wealth was consecrated to the specious demands of charity and devotion, still, "party spirit . . . is a principle of union as well as dissension. The bishops, from eighteen hundred pulpits, inculcated the duty of passive obedience to a lawful and orthodox sovereign."[5] Always, Gibbon's effort was to preserve the balance.[6]

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1 V, 309. The underlining is the present writer's. The choice of a word affords a striking example of Gibbon's bias; can it be supposed that Gibbon himself expected that this would be accepted as the verdict of history?

2 VI, 465.

3 IV, 67.

4 E.g., J. M. Robertson, Gibbon on Christianity, p. xv.

5 IV, 175.

6 This balance also preserved him from the view later advanced by ecclesiastical historians that Christianity was not the

A parallel development.-- It must be reiterated that far from assigning to Christianity the main blame for the fall of the Empire, Gibbon discerned the rise of the one and the fall of the other as a parallel development; their history intertwined but did not intertwine causally. In the words of James Bryce:

> As the Empire had decayed, the Church had grown stronger, and now while the one, trembling at the approach of the destroyer, saw province after province torn away, the other, rising in stately youth, prepared to fill her place and to govern in her name, and in doing so, to adopt and sanctify the notion of a universal and unending state.[1]

Gibbon's recognition of this fact together with his decided preference for the old establishment of Roman antiquity may be cited as a partial explanation for the impression of hostility which pervaded the History.

Eighteenth Century Influence

Rationalism.-- Another fundamental consideration in accounting for Gibbon's attitude towards ecclesiastical history is reflected in the confidence in reason which he shared with his eighteenth century contemporaries.[2] Reason, thus relied upon as the absolute standard, was never defined. True to the assumption of his time, Gibbon regarded it as that which needed no definition: the common sense understanding available to every person of education and enlightenment.

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enemy but the friend of the Empire. Cf. George Finlay, Greece Under the Romans (Edinburgh: W. Blackwood & Sons, 1857), p. 106; and W. M. Ramsay, Church in the Roman Empire (London: Hodder & Stoughton, 1893), p. 192.

1 James Bryce, The Holy Roman Empire (London: Macmillan & Co., 1864), p. 12.

2 Gibbon recognized that reason could be corrupted, but clung to it as the only possible basis of procedure. Cf. "Hints" No. IX, among the Gibbon Papers in the Manuscript Room of the British Museum, IX, 197.

Nor was the case for this confidence ever argued. Gibbon was convinced that rationality must be regarded by every sensible person as the basic measurement of all things; and this supposition seemed so proper and necessary that any statement of justification was superfluous.

Thus it became the historian's duty "to reconcile the interest of religion with that of reason."[1] All religious convictions which would not stand scrutiny at the bar of reason belonged to the childhood of the race;[2] they were not tenable when men became mature. "The words and shadows that might amuse the child no longer satisfied his manly reason."[3]

Sensationalism.-- Together with this confidence in reason was a sensationalist theory of knowledge. The 'real' world was the physical world. Anyone who claimed insight into a supra-sensual order was the victim of illusion.[4] Knowledge must be of reality; and reality, by common consent, was confined to what could be ascertained by the senses.[5]

This assumption was constantly operative in Gibbon's writings. In the Autobiography, he reported that in his youth he had come upon a 'solid' argument against transubstantiation, the

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1 II, 32. Of the Jacobites, Gibbon wrote: "Their doctors (as far as I can measure the degrees of nonsense) are more remote from the precincts of reason" (V, 165).

2 The observation, "Augustine is a memorable instance of this gradual progress from reason to faith" (II, 16, note), must be interpreted ironically.

3 VI, 134.

4 Thus Gibbon wrote contemptuously of Scanderberg, "nor is it easy to conceive what new illumination at the age of forty could be poured into his soul" (VII, 158).

5 For an exposition of the absurdity of a strict sensationalist epistemology, see F. H. Bradley, The Presuppositions of Critical History (Oxford: James Parker & Co., 1874), p. 7ff.

effect of which was to settle the matter by simple majority vote. "The text of scripture," he wrote, "is attested only by a single sense — our sight; while the real presence itself is disproved by three of our senses — the sight, the touch, the taste."[1]

In the History, the same attitude was in evidence. Thus immortality was a doctrine "removed beyond the senses and experience of mankind."[2] As a crushing argument against it, the historian observed: "Those who most firmly believe her [the soul's] immaterial nature are at a loss to understand how she can think or act without the agency of the organs of sense."[3] Similarly, in his estimate of the Reformers, Gibbon complained that instead of consulting the evidences of "their sight, their feeling, and their taste," they were "awed by the words of Jesus."[4] Yet it would appear that just this disposition to cling to Christ despite the fluctuating sense impressions of passing generations has constituted the continuing strength and vitality of the Church through the centuries. But this consideration did not impress Gibbon, since the Christians had refused to consult "the evidence of their senses."[5]

A recent analyst has asserted that men are generally right in what they affirm and wrong in what they deny.[6] In his denial of the Supra-rational and the Supra-sensual, Gibbon exposed his writings to the charge of rationalistic dogmatism. He made

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1 Autobiography, p. 63. Today, all but the positivist would probably agree that belief in transubstantiation can be neither proved nor disproved by an appeal to the testimony of the senses.

2 II, 21.

3 V, 372. Cf. also Appendix 49.

4 VI, 131.

5 Ibid., p. 131.

6 Cf. H. Richard Niebuhr, op. cit., p. 237.

inferences which could not be supported by scientific evidence. He opened himself to the accusation that as far as the real essentials of the religious consciousness were concerned, he knew nothing about them.[1]

Attack on superstition.-- The supposition that Gibbon was reflecting eighteenth century ideas is further confirmed by the fact that he tended to label every aspect and manifestation of religion which would not stand before the bar of reason and the senses as superstition. Nor was that consignment confined to Christianity.[2] Of Mohammedanism, he wrote that it produced "a seasonable vision for such are the manufacture of every religion."[3] Upon the Jews, he poured his scorn for their veneration of the heroes of the Old Testament who stood convicted, Gibbon believed, by their own records, of every kind of crime against nature and humanity.[4]

But Christianity proved not a whit more immune to the progress of superstition than other religions. (The historian often employed the two terms, Christianity and Superstition interchangeably.) Under the leadership of the Popes, those "great masters

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1 A careful ecclesiastical historian has asserted that there was in Gibbon "an absolute want of comprehension of the nature of religion, whether Christian or other, and of the forces by which religions make conquests." Cf. Williston Walker, A History of the Christian Church (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1918), p. 493.

2 Nor did he neglect to denounce superstition and imposture outside the sphere of religion altogether. Thus the sentimentalism that clung about the almost divine quality of kings, the follies of militarism, and the mystifications of the law — all were included in his indictment.

3 VI, 4. See also V, 367, and V, 420, for further instances of superstition in Mohammedanism. But Gibbon admired the Moslems for refusing to divide up the Deity. See V, 420.

4 V, 383.

of human credulity,"[1] the tendency had become "to believe because it is absurd, to revere all that is contemptible, to despise whatever might deserve the esteem of a rational being."[2] Likewise the monks impressed Gibbon as embodiments of the worst elements of superstition, and some of his most devastating sarcasm was reserved for "these unhappy exiles from social life."[3]

Gibbon was prepared to support his charges with what he regarded as a wealth of specific instances. Thus the doctrine of the Assumption was affirmed by the Catholic Church.[4] "Yet Christians of the first four centuries were ignorant of the death and burial of Mary."[5] Similarly, belief in the Immaculate Conception of the Virgin Mother has come to be regarded as an indispensable item of Catholic dogma. Yet Gibbon argued that there was sufficient reason to suppose that the whole idea was borrowed directly from the Koran.[6] Likewise, belief in miracles in general was subscribed to by Christians as an essential element in the edifice of faith.

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1 VII, 293. "Innocent," he observed, "may boast of the two most signal triumphs over sense and humanity, the establishment of transubstantiation and the origin of the inquisition" (VI, 369).

2 VII, 310. Gibbon claimed these inclinations were instilled in every prospective pope as an essential part of his training. Elsewhere he had written derisively of the irrational tendencies of religion: "As this opinion has the strongest recommendation of absurdity, I am surprised that it was not more explicitly decided on in the affirmative" (V, 298).

3 IV, 67.

4 Gibbon cited the parallelism between the 'Mother of God' and the old genialogy of Olympus. Cf. V, 120; and in a note he recalled the laughter of the Pagans "at the new Cybele of the Christians" (Ibid., p. 120, note).

5 V, 122. Likewise Gibbon discerned the 'development' of superstition in the transfer of the 'brothers' of Christ to the status of 'cousins' (II, 96, note). He observed, "The Latins improved on that hint [the idea of a second wife for Joseph] and asserted the perpetual celebacy of Joseph" (Ibid.).

6 V, 364.

Yet "does there exist a single instance of a saint asserting that he himself possessed the gift of miracles?"[1] Still again, worship of the deities and demons of Paganism was a crime against the "supreme majesty of God";[2] yet did not the Christians proceed to worship the saints and martyrs in place of the pagan gods and heroes?

Further indictment.-- Gibbon considered superstition, thus identified, to be indefensible on many counts. First and foremost was the stifling effect upon the mind. "Curiosity and scepticism were benumbed by the habits of obedience and faith."[3] He further charged that superstition defeated the real ends of religion itself: "A superstitious conscience," he wrote, "is less forcibly bound by the spiritual energy than by the outward and visible symbols of an oath."[4] He also argued that superstition had transformed beyond recognition the original religion of Jesus and the apostles, and observed:

> if . . . St. Peter or St. Paul could return to the Vatican, they might possibly inquire the name of the Deity who is worshipped with such mysterious rites in that magnificent temple: at Oxford or Geneva, they would experience less surprise; but it might still be incumbent on them to peruse the catechism of the church, and to study the orthodox commentators on their own writings and the words of their Master.[5]

The advance of anti-rational tendencies, it was claimed, represented a risk to the clergy itself. "Under the reign of superstition, he wrote, "they had much to fear from the violence of

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1 II, 32, note.
2 III, 198.
3 V, 270. Elsewhere, he had written, "The imagination, which had been raised by a painful effort to the contemplation of the Universal Cause, embraced such inferior objects of adoration as were more proportioned to its gross conceptions" (III, 225).
4 VII, 150.
5 V, 420.

mankind."[1] And there was the supposition that once started upon the path of superstition, religion might become incapable of drawing back or ever extricating itself. Thus he wrote of "the shackles of prejudice which enchain the cleric,"[2] and of "the impossibility of a philosophical theologian."[3] Even when rational elements did appear on the religious scene, Gibbon questioned the likelihood of their lasting: "It only remains to observe whether such sublime simplicity [as the altered Lutheran worship was intended to introduce] be consistent with popular devotion."[4]

Limitation of outlook.-- It is evident from these instances that Gibbon was making no effort to inquire into the religious consciousness, to explain why a rational being like man had persisted since time began in irrational involvements like religion. Nor was there any attempt to appraise religious attitudes against the background of their various historical epochs even though these differed radically from Gibbon's own. In his view, superstition was fundamentally the same phenomenon whenever and wherever it reared its ugly head. The task of the philosopher was to identify and expose it as the enemy of enlightened humanity.

A Scientific Study

It can scarcely be considered surprising that with this overall view of religion, Gibbon should feel the necessity of ad-

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1 VII, 224.
2 Misc. Works, 541.
3 II, 468.
4 VI, 132. Again: "The influence of superstition is fluctuating and precarious; and the slave, whose reason is subdued, will often be delivered by his avarice or pride" (VII, 224).

vancing a naturalistic explanation of the rise of Christianity."[1] "A natural scientist," wrote a contemporary historian, "would be committing an act of sabotage if he brought God into his scientific argument."[2] This was precisely the principle with which Gibbon proposed to approach the study of ecclesiastical history. Like a natural scientist, he committed himself "to learn by the scientific study of just the observable interconnections of events."[3] He claimed to confine his inquiry to considerations which did not require any reference to the Deity.

Restriction of the inquiry.-- The implication of this approach, it was immediately understood, had the effect of eliminating God from the entire historic process. Yet Gibbon, for whatever reason and against his sensationalist epistemology, took pains to insist that this was not his intention at all.[4] From the outset he announced that it was to be an inquiry, "with becoming submission," into the 'secondary' causes of the rise of Christianity and thereby implicitly affirmed the existence of a First Cause.[5] "It is my intention," he wrote, "to remark only such human causes as were permitted to second the influence of revelation."[6]

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1 A critic claimed, "The question which Gibbon asked when he proposed five causes for the spread of Christianity, introduced a new problem, an entirely new method of treatment." Cf. A. C. Headlam, "Methods of Early Church History," The English Historical Review, XIV (January, 1899), 13. But Gibbon never supposed that he was breaking new ground. For an earlier analysis of the "Causae humanae propagatae religionis Christianae," cf. J. L. Mosheim, De Rebus Christianorum Ante Constantium Magnum Comentarii (Helmstadii: Friedericum Weygand, 1753), p. 223 ff.

2 Herbert Butterfield, History and Human Relations, p. 102.

3 Ibid.

4 Bury argued that it was a device to insure protection against persecution and had no other significance. Cf. Autobiography, p. xv.

5 For the fuller statement, see II, 2.

6 II, 34.

This announced intention was further supported by the fact that Gibbon made no attempt to enter into the question of the divine origin of the Christian Religion.[1] He began his analysis at a point in which the Church was already an organized and operating institution, conceding, it would appear, that its history before that point was adequately expounded in the Book of Acts and in the Gospels. By this concession, Gibbon extricated himself from the controversial subject which was to occupy so much of nineteenth century scholarship.[2] It enabled him to proceed at once to a more congenial task: the description of the rise of Christianity as a natural process.

The approach contested.-- This neat manoeuvring did not escape the scrutiny of critics. Milman and Guizot contended that Gibbon had not properly consulted the testimony of Acts.[3] "If he had only taken the pains to present Christianity in its primary development," the critic lamented, "he would have encountered an argument for the divine authority" which would have been "explicable on no other hypothesis than a heavenly origin."[4] The apologist also argued that the further Christianity advanced, the more causes purely human were enlisted in its favour.[5]

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1 "By the wise dispensation of Providence," he wrote, "a mysterious veil was cast over the infancy of the Church" (II, 88).

2 It has also been a vital question for theologically minded thinkers of the twentieth century. See, D. M. Baillie, Faith in God (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1927), p. 227 ff.

3 A critic contended, "The main question of the divine origin of the religion was entirely eluded or speciously conceded" (Milman, op. cit., p. ix). See Guizot's Edition of The Decline and Fall, I, 208, note; also, Appendix 45.

4 Milman, op. cit., p. viii. Even more questionable was the following concession of Milman: "When it [Christianity] had received its impetus from above, it might be left to make its way by its natural force (Ibid., p. viii).

5 Ibid., p. viii.

Gibbon was on far more certain historical ground in refusing even to try to appraise the extent of the divine influence or the particular periods in which it was or was not operative. It was rather the function of the historian to "discover the inevitable mixture of error and corruption which she [religion] contracted in a long residence upon earth, among a weak and degenerate race of beings."[1]

An evaluation.-- How must Gibbon's claim of presenting a naturalistic approach to ecclesiastical history be evaluated? Clearly there is little reason to suppose that he attached any actual significance to the operation of the First Cause in the historic process or that his concession of a divine origin of Christianity was anything more than an ironic one. Not a single passage but rather the whole impact of The Decline and Fall points to this conclusion. The ecclesiastical writer was therefore hardly correct in his contention: "Gibbon was too keen-sighted not to see the limitation of his own theory. Whatever may have been his own beliefs, he was probably quite sincere in speaking only of secondary causes."[2] Of that supposition, anyone who has detected the prevailing tone of this "candid and rational inquiry" would scarcely be convinced.

Yet it remains true that the use of the device of confining the survey to a consideration of secondary causes was of extreme importance in support of Gibbon's claim to be writing a

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1 II, 2.

2 Headlam, "Methods of Early Church History," op. cit., p. 13. Two other critics assumed Gibbon genuinely to have been disposed to acknowledge a First Cause. See Appendix 46; but such a misreading of his meaning is difficult to account for in the face of the clear intent of Gibbon's irony.

scientific history.[1] For this meant that unlike the writings of most rationalist historians, his History was expressly kept from a dogmatic dismissal of the possible presence of the supernatural factor in history. This latter question was one upon which, strictly speaking, his historical inquiry could afford him no occasion to comment.

The Five Causes

Together with this indication of the character of the general approach, a brief exposition of the actual development of his famous five causes of the success of Christianity is an essential part of this inquiry.[2] Gibbon listed them as: the zeal of the early Christians; their conviction of immortality; the belief in miracles; the good works of the Christians; and their internal organization.

It was the first of these, Gibbon argued, that provided the Christians with their "valour." The next three equipped the valour with weapons. The final factor provided the means of consolidating their gains; it "united their courage, directed their arms."[3] These causes must be appraised always in the light of Gibbon's attempt to provide a 'human', naturalistic account for their occurrence.

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1 That Gibbon regarded this 'device' as an important part of his defence as an historian is suggested by a passage in which he claimed that he had allowed the "full and irresistable weight of the First Great Cause" (Misc. Works, p. 752).

2 For an account of the causes and conditions of the propagation of Christianity which contains the conclusions of more recent scholarship, Bury cited the important work of Harnack, Die Mission und Ausbreitung des Christentums in den ersten drei Jahrhunderten, 1902. See II, 2, note.

3 II, 57. Were these 'effects' or 'causes'? See Appendix 47.

The zeal of the Christians.-- Gibbon contended that this factor could be traced for its origin to the Jews and the sullen obstinacy with which they maintained their peculiar rites and unsocial manners in the midst of other peoples, and which "seemed to mark them out as a distinct species of men who boldly professed . . . their implacable hatred to the rest of human kind."[1] But the Jewish faith with this exclusiveness was hardly fitted for the conquest of the Roman world.[2]

Under these circumstances Christianity presented itself, "armed with the strength of the Mosaic law and delivered from the weight of its fetters."[3] The gates of salvation were thrown open to all, and "a pure and spiritual worship" was initiated which was "adapted to all climates, as well as all conditions of mankind."[4]

Next arose the need for the new sect to extricate itself from the shadow of Judaism, a process which ended in the outright rejection of the Mosaic law as being no longer binding for Christians.[5] A zealous animosity was directed as well at the Gnostic heretics who deviated in the opposite direction and who concluded that the Jewish religion "never was instituted by the wisdom of the Deity."[6]

Finally, it was the same zeal, influenced by a superstitious fear of demons, which inspired the Christians to a contempt of the

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1 II, 3.

2 Was the positing of a Jewish origin an adequate explanation for the emergence of Christian zeal? For the views of later critics, see Appendix 48.

3 II, 7.

4 Ibid., p. 7.

5 In this development, Gibbon discerned that the same zeal which had been inherited from the Jews was at length turned against those who insisted upon maintaining the traditional observances. (Ibid., p. 9)

6 Ibid., p. 12.

national deities who were believed to incorporate these demons. The Christians thus must take no part in national holidays or any public or private rite sponsored by the Pagans, since it was the Christian's first duty to guard against "the stain of idolatry."[1] Gibbon argued that by these frequent protestations, "their attachment to the faith was continually fortified" and "in proportion to the increase of zeal, they combated with the more ardour" for the victory of their faith.[2]

The belief in immortality.-- Gibbon asserted that the idea of immortality was known in ancient philosophy and classical mythology. It had a natural appeal to men's imagination, prompted by vanity, since they "were unwilling . . . to suppose that a being, for whose dignity they entertained the most sincere admiration, could be limited to a spot of earth, and to a few years of duration."[3] Yet Gibbon discovered that the doctrine had difficulty taking hold,[4] was rejected by all Jews except the Pharisees, and was not taken seriously by "the eminent persons who flourished in the age of Cicero."[5] The difficulty was that the doctrine, "dictated by nature, approved by reason, and received by superstition" needed to "obtain the sanction of Divine truth from the authority and example of Christ."[6]

But once this authority was secured, and joined by a belief in the imminent end of the world, and the commencement of Christ's

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1 II, 18. 2 Ibid., p. 20.
3 II, 21.
4 By the "mysterious dispensations of Providence," it was "omitted from the law of Moses" (Ibid., p. 23).
5 Ibid., p. 21.
6 Ibid., p. 24. For views of critics on Gibbon's handling of the subject of immortality, see Appendix 49.

reign upon earth, the conviction became a potent weapon in appealing to the hopes and fears of mankind: to their natural hopes to have a share in the happiness of a temporal reign, but alike to their fears, since the most dreadful calamities were denounced against the unbelieving world. Was it not understandable that these claims might not be without effect upon the Polytheist? "If he could once persuade himself to suspect that the Christian religion might possibly be true, it became an easy task to convince him that it was the safest and most prudent party he could possibly embrace."[1]

The miracles.-- Gibbon commenced the argument on the belief in miracles by contending that "the most curious, or the most credulous, among the Pagans were often persuaded to enter into a society which asserted an actual claim of miraculous powers."[2] But that the historian regarded these 'claims' with deep distrust is evident from the whole of his exposition.[3] He cited, for example, the failure of any of the Pagan writers to mention the praeternatural darkness of three hours at the time of the Crucifixion.[4] Nor could

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1 II, 29.

2 Ibid., p. 33. Yet there was little elaboration of how this actually occurred. The capacity to perform miracles was a common claim of most religions of the time. How did this particular reputation contribute to the winning of converts to the new faith? In what specific way did such mere claims become factors in the final triumph of Christianity? To these questions there was in Gibbon's analysis no adequate answer.

3 The real impact of the argument was to deny the possibility of miracles rather than to offer the expected naturalistic interpretation of their occurrence. Occasionally he did advance such an interpretation; see Appendix 50.

4 Gibbon lamented that "this miraculous event, which ought to have excited the wonder, the curiosity, and the devotion of mankind, passed without notice in an age of science and history" (II, 74). Only one critic has refused to see irony in this passage. See Macdonald, "Irony in History," op. cit., p. 559. Christian scholars have more commonly sought to account for the silence of Pagan writers by attempting to naturalize and localize the darkness. See e.g., Guizot's Edition of The Decline and Fall, I, 207, note.

he find adequate historical basis for accepting any of the miracles.

There was not only the problem of evidence, but also the obvious need of a cessation point. When did miracles cease? Why "deny to the venerable Bede, or to the holy Bernard, the same degree of confidence which, in the second century, we had . . . granted to Justin or to Irenaeus"?[1] Yet every Christian was convinced that there must have been a point at which miracles stopped. If so, what was one to think of those who "still supported their pretensions after they had lost their power"?[2] The clear inference was that every effort to defend miracles landed one in insuperable difficulties.[3] Thus Gibbon, going beyond Middleton, and following Hume, excluded miracles from all of history including the Apostolic period.[4]

One parenthetic comment may be permitted. In his treatment of miracles, Gibbon stepped out of his role as a scientific historian and indulged in a favourite activity of eighteenth century iconoclasm. But what he inadvertently accomplished in conjunction with the opening and more original attacks of Middleton and Hume, was to destroy forever the temptation of theology to try to establish a case for faith on the questionable ground of 'proven'

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1 II, 32. 2 Ibid., p. 33.

3 Of Middleton, he wrote in his Journal on 25 February, 1764, "Cet homme avoit bien de la nettete et de la penetration. Il voyoit bien jusqu'ou l'on pouvoit pousser les consequences de ses principes mais il ne lui convenoit pas de les tirer." Cf. Le Journal de Gibbon à Lausanne, 17 Août 1763 - 19 Avril 1764, edited by Georges Bonnard (Lausanne: F. Rouge, 1945), p. 224.

4 He attached apparent significance to the case of the nobleman who declared that if he were gratified by the sight of a single person raised from the dead, he would have become a Christian, and the fact that it was thought proper to decline this "fair and reasonable" challenge (II, 31). For similar instances, and a critic's mistaken inference, see Appendix 50. Cf. also Chapter One of this inquiry.

miracles.[1]

Likewise, the supposition that miracles could be established by a dispassionate weighing of 'evidence' was shelved for good. It was seen that it was necessary to have a sustaining faith in the activity of the eternal God in history in order to carry with it an acceptance of the occurrence of miracles.[2] Moreover, it was subsequently understood that what was involved was not merely an event; but an event together with an interpretation made through the eyes of faith were required to make any happening in history a 'miracle'.[3]

Good works.-- Gibbon was more within the scope of his inquiry when in attempting to account for the virtues of the first Christians, he cited two understandably 'human' motives "which might naturally render the lives of the primitive Christians much purer and more austere than . . . their Pagan contemporaries."[4] These he suggested were repentance for past sins and concern for the reputation of their society.

Repentance became an effective factor in appealing to the degenerate elements, because the new faith held out the hope of complete cleansing from the guilt of past sins. It was understandable that the derelicts and castaways would embrace a life of penitence and virtue, and hunger after perfection, since "while reason embraces

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1 But the position regarding miracles did not change at once. This is indicated by Paley's great work, first published in 1794. He observed, "We do not assume the attributes of the Deity, or the existence of the future state, in order to prove the reality of miracles. That reality must be proved by evidence." Cf. William Paley, A View of the Evidences of Christianity in Three Parts, (6d ed.; London: R. Faulder, 1797), I, 4.

2 See e.g., Walker, op. cit., p. 491.

3 For an exposition of the view of miracles as maintained by representative modern theology, see Emil Brunner, The Christian Doctrine of Creation and Redemption, Dogmatics, trans. Olive Wyon (London: Lutterworth Press, 1952), p. 186 ff.

4 II, 34.

a cold mediocrity, our passions hurry us, with rapid violence, over the space which lies between the most opposite extremes."[1] Thus since Christianity's appeal was geared to a broad base, its success was enhanced.

Concern for the reputation of their society was also a powerful factor, Gibbon contended, in producing good works among the Christians. Since they were continually under the scrutiny of hostile critics, it might be anticipated that the Christians would seek, "by the strictest integrity and the fairest dealing, to remove the suspicions which the profane are too apt to conceive against the appearance of sanctity."[2] While this strict morality might appear to go against the natural impulses of humanity, and carried with it a condemnation of luxury and easy living, Gibbon believed he could still trace a 'human' motivation: "But it is always easy, as well as agreeable, for the inferior ranks of mankind to claim a merit from the contempt of that pomp and pleasure which fortune has placed beyond their reach."[3]

Even with those who chose a life of celibacy in preference to the pleasures of the flesh, spiritual pride could be considered sufficient compensation for the loss of sensual satisfaction.[4] But the fact remained that all this rigour in morality, however humanly explicable, could not help but impress the multitude of Pagans who "were inclined to estimate the merit of the sacrifice by its apparent

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1 II, 35.

2 Ibid., p. 36. For further instances, see Appendix 51. But is it necessary to suspect irony in his recognition of the good works of the Christians? Cf. Edward Clodd, Gibbon and Christianity (London: Watts & Co., 1916), p. 52.

3 II, 38.

4 Gibbon wrote of "that secret pride which, under the semblance of devotion, insinuates itself into the human heart" (II, 7).

difficulty."[1]

The organization of the Church.-- This topic provided the historian with a congenial task: to trace the growth of ecclesiastical government as an understandably human phenomenon. He contended that its psychological impetus stemmed from the love of action which became even more demanding, since the other great human drive, the love of pleasure, had been suppressed. The impulse towards action, Gibbon argued, found an acceptable outlet in the government of the Church.

The argument was advanced with care. The historian wanted to show how from a group of equal persons presided over by Presbyters, the Church, through the varying ambitions and abilities of various men, became ruled by Bishops whose final authority was in time usurped by Primates; and the final step was the ascendancy of the Roman Primate over the rest.[2] And the fact that this whole development was not accomplished without resistance and opposition was cited in further support of the contention that human factors were in operation, including "such passions as seem much more adapted to the senate or to the camp."[3]

Further factors.-- Once Gibbon had accounted for the emergence of the organization, he proceeded to analyse how the Hierarchy employed such disparate weapons as the disposition of tithes, the

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1 II, 40. But this was more a factor in the internal consolidation of the Christians than in their outward expansion. How this stern morality could actually win 'the multitude of Pagans', the historian did not adequately indicate.

2 The same understandable human process could be traced in the rise of Synods and in the ascendancy of Rome. See Appendix 52.

3 II, 49. For other views of the fundamental motivation behind the development of ecclesiastical organization, see Appendix 53.

administration of penance, the threat of excommunication, and the management of wealth to consolidate the advances of the Church and to entrench itself in a position of constituted authority. These considerations, Gibbon concluded, all contributed to the 'human' strength of the Church.

To complete his survey, he cited other factors also favourable to the final outcome. There was the weakness of Polytheism, the scepticism which failed to satisfy the spiritual hunger of the masses, and the peace and stability insured by the Roman Empire.[1] All these factors taken together comprised the natural and human explanation for the triumph of the Gospel.

Criticism.-- None but the most bigoted would deny that such an analysis could and did contribute to an understanding of this important subject.[2] But it is one thing to contend that the foregoing factors were involved in Christianity's final victory over the other religions of the Empire. This Gibbon did argue, for the most part, convincingly enough.[3] It is another thing to infer that these human causes were the only factors in the process, thereby inferentially ruling out the possibility of an impact from the side of the Supernatural. This Gibbon also unmistakably did and thus proceeded by inference beyond the bounds of a strictly scientific

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1 Gibbon claimed that so congenial was the general climate of the times that the wonder was not that Christianity was successful, but that its success was not "still more rapid and still more universal" (II, 60).

2 The ecclesiastical historian who so summarily dismissed Gibbon, admitted that "with his five causes, most historians of the present would not take exception" (Walker, op. cit., p. 493).

3 J. B. Bury contended that Gibbon's account was most exposed to criticism for its omissions. Cf. Bury, "Gibbon," Encyclopaedia Britannica, 11d ed., Vol. XI. Another critic's complaint was that Gibbon failed to account for the coincidence of the five causes. Cf. J. H. Newman, An Essay in Aid of a Grammar of Assent (5d. ed.;

inquiry.[1]

But it is still another thing to state categorically that the natural, human factors were the sole ones to be considered. This in a sense most important for his status as a critical historian, Gibbon emphatically did not do. "I have attempted," he concluded, "to display the secondary causes which so efficaciously assisted the truth of the Christian Religion."[2] That statement, stripped of all ironic overtones, constituted the real defence of Edward Gibbon as an ecclesiastical historian.

Motives of the Christians

Closely connected with the disposition to uncover a naturalistic explanation for the success of Christianity, there was in Gibbon the impulse to ascertain the real motives of human conduct. In this, he was influenced by an age which believed that it had detected the frequent gulf which existed between professed motives of action and actual ones. Gibbon believed that it was the historian's duty to expose the latter. But he did not regard this as a difficult assignment, since all conduct could be reduced to certain analysable human impulses.

Greed.-- High on the list of these, the historian placed greed. Human beings were impelled by the desire to amass for themselves material possessions, and Christians in this respect were no different from non-Christians.

London: Burns & Oates, 1881), p. 457. But this was a difficult if not impossible task to assign to a critical historian.

1 Gibbon commented upon Bishop William Warburton that he was "dogmatic just in his inference" (Gibbon's "Hints" No. X, op. cit., IX, 196).

2 II, 57.

> If the ecclesiastics were checked in the pursuit of personal emolument, they would exert a more laudable industry to increase the wealth of the church, and dignify their coyetousness with the specious names of piety and patriotism.[1]

Other than in scattered passages, however, he did not expound the economic aspect of the advance of the Church.[2] And even in his treatment of individuals, there was no suggestion of the all-consuming character of this factor which was to arise in the thought of the next century.[3]

Ambition.-- Operative along with greed, Gibbon believed, was ambition, which in every age and climate had prevailed "with the same commanding energy." Just why this was so Gibbon was at a loss to know, since through the centuries ambition had invariably produced not personal happiness but misery, frustration, and final ruin.[4] Nevertheless, it was precisely this impulse which was at the basis of much of the history of the Church.[5] "Religion was the pretence," he wrote, "but . . . ambition was the genuine motive of episcopal warfare."[6]

Pride.-- Gibbon held that pride had constantly to be regarded as an underlying human motive.[7] It was pride which prompted people

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1 III, 31. For further instances, see Appendix 53.

2 For exceptions to this general statement, see Appendix 53; and for a discussion of the economic aspect of ecclesiasticism, see also II, 52 ff., 339; III, 29; V, 39, 290; VII, 223.

3 He did assert that "avarice is perhaps the only permanent ruling passion" (Gibbon, "Hints," No. VII, op. cit., IX, 193).

4 Cf. V, 258; also Chapter Two of the present inquiry.

5 Gibbon observed sardonically: "Ambition is a weed of quick and early vegetation in the vineyard of Christ" (VII, 248).

6 V, 119. For a further indication of the operation of ambition in ecclesiastical history, see Appendix 53.

7 Closely allied with pride was vanity, which Gibbon believed to be the basis for the desire for immortality and the real motive for many of the martyrdoms. See II, 21, 110.

to refuse the Gospel.[1] It was pride which made it possible to turn one's back upon the pleasures of the world. It was, moreover, by virtue of its righteousness that the Church, in Gibbon's view, constituted a threat to society. For as he considered the claims to spiritual authority which had been advanced on the strength of moral rectitude, he observed that "to a philosophic eye the vices of the clergy are far less dangerous than their virtues."[2]

A legitimate search.-- How must Gibbon's effort to uncover the real motives of human conduct be evaluated? Commonly, it has been regarded as confirmation of the cynicism which pervaded the whole of the History. Yet in his concern to determine the motives behind human behaviour as being of crucial importance to any understanding of the historic process, Gibbon was anticipating a twentieth century conception of the purpose of history. "For history," wrote Collingwood, "the object to be discovered is not the mere event but the thought expressed in it. What did Brutus think which made him decide to stab Caesar?"[3] Collingwood even contended that the historian was concerned with thought alone.[4]

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1 E.g., "Those persons who in the world had followed . . . the dictates of benevolence and propriety, derived such a calm satisfaction from the opinion of their own rectitude, as rendered them much less susceptible of the sudden emotions of shame, of grief, and of terror, which have given birth to so many wonderful conversions" (II, 35).

2 V, 319. Was Gibbon inadvertently approaching the Christian doctrine of original sin? See Appendix 54.

3 The Idea of History, p. 214. If this were not merely an illustrative question, if Collingwood had been actually concerned to inquire into the matter, he might have consulted Gibbon's "Digression on the Character of Brutus" (Gibbon Papers, I, 264). See Appendix 55.

4 The Idea of History, p. 214. But it is questionable whether Gibbon would have concurred with Collingwood's contention, since he believed that man was more than a 'thinking' animal, and that desires, feelings, passions played their part in history as well. For a critique of Collingwood, see G. J. Renier, History, Its Purpose and

Against this, it must be acknowledged that in simple 'positivist' fashion, Gibbon tended to classify human motives into general categories rather than to inquire into the unique mental atmosphere of the individual under consideration.[1] Unquestionably, he was not conspicuously equipped with that constructive and sympathetic imagination which Collingwood considered so indispensable to any critical historian.[2] Yet it may be claimed that in his attempt to fathom the real thought motivating action, Gibbon was possessed by a true historical feeling for the past.[3]

Moralistic tendencies.-- One further criticism of Gibbon may be considered in this connection: the charge that despite his disassociation with formal religious faith, he constantly acted as a moralist, passing judgements upon the personalities of the past by virtue of an uncritical application of the standards of eighteenth century Enlightenment.[4]

Gibbon was indeed a son of his own age, and could not be acquainted with the contributions of the school of historical relativism. Moreover, it might properly be disavowed that the purpose of history was, in Lord Acton's sense, to drive home the lessons

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Method (London: George Allen & Unwin Ltd., 1950), p. 44 ff.

1 A critic described the formulae of positivism thus: "The treatment of an event not as unique but as an instance of a certain type, and the explanation of it by discovering a cause applicable not to it alone but to every event of the same general kind" (Collingwood, op. cit., p. 148).

2 This may possibly account for Collingwood's contemptuous attitude towards Gibbon; for he wrote disparagingly (but without citing any further instances) of Gibbon's "characteristic neglect to mention the source of his information." Cf. R. G. Collingwood, An Essay on Metaphysics (Oxford: The Clarendon Press, 1940), p. 220. See Chapter Three for the argument that this charge cannot be substantiated in Gibbon's writings.

3 For a testimony to Gibbon's achievement in this respect, cf. Meinecke, op. cit., p. 248.

4 The selection of adjectives to describe his characters suggested this. People were "artful," "credulous," "timorous,"

of an unchangeable morality; and Gibbon would most certainly have disavowed it.[1] Still the impulse of the historian to formulate judgements on various aspects of the process he is surveying would appear to be inevitable. As a critic of Acton's view of history has argued:

> Nothing could be more painful than to prevent the historian from commenting on his story as he tells it. The historian has a right to make judgements even though these might only be a digression. We have him unfairly muzzled if we do not grant him the pleasure of his 'obiter dicta'.[2]

However this may be, it is evident that if The Decline and Fall were stripped of its moral judgements, as in one edition it was stripped of its obscenities, much of its interest and pungency would be sacrificed as well.[3]

Distrust of Zeal

Still another factor in accounting for Gibbon's attitude towards ecclesiastical history can be seen in his appreciation of the placid in life; for this invoked in him a deep distrust of all varieties of zeal and enthusiasm. Bury's statement in this connection has become almost a classic:

> The conviction that enthusiasm is inconsistent with intellectual balance was engrained in his mental constitution, and confirmed by study and experience. We must consider Gibbon's zealous distrust of zeal as an essential and most suggestive characteristic of the 'Decline and Fall'.[4]

A general attitude.-- Zeal for Gibbon could be defined according to the eighteenth century understanding of the term, as

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"intrepid," "haughty," "equitable."

1 Gibbon once examined the question whether historians could be friends of virtue. See Appendix 55.

2 Herbert Butterfield, The Whig Interpretation of History, p. 104.

3 Thomas Bowdler's Edition of The Decline and Fall (London: Longman, Rees, Orme, Brown & Green, 1826).

4 I, xxii.

"a belief or a conceit of being divinely inspired or commissioned."[1] On the strength of this conception, he was opposed to zeal in general rather than only to the particular expression of Christian zeal. Never for example did he permit antipathies against those who zealously stood on one side of a question to excite his sympathies with those who stood on the other. There is indeed ample support for the supposition that this historian was opposed to zeal irrespective of who had it.[2]

Thus Gibbon's approach to the zeal of the triumphant Catholic party has already been cited. But that did not prevent the historian from censuring the pagan "philosophers, who now assumed the unworthy office of directing the blind zeal of persecution."[3] It has even been argued that so sensitive was he on this subject, he mistakenly supposed Christians at large to have been objects of vindictive feelings and repressive measures that were actually directed only against the priesthood.[4] And the fact that he was critical on this count of Julian, who has been called the 'hero' of The Decline and Fall, confirms the supposition that he was not insensitive to the possibility of zeal among the Pagans.[5]

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1 The New Century Dictionary of the English Language (London: The Century Co., 1927), I.

2 His most recent biographer contended, "In his distaste for zeal and enthusiasm of every kind, he was acting irresponsibly" (Joyce, Edward Gibbon, p. 146). But he did not relate why this must be. May not a case be made for the contention that "historic enthusiasms . . . are precarious things? It is so nearly certain that our enthusiasm will not be shared by the next inquirer (Robertson, Gibbon, p. 84). And there is reason to believe that the biographer himself was not above being responsible for 'irresponsible' utterance, as the final chapter of this inquiry indicates.

3 II, 131.

4 This claim was advanced by the Editor of the Bohn Edition of The Decline and Fall and was quoted by Robertson, Gibbon, p. 83.

5 Gibbon contended that in his zealous devotion to the hopeless task of restoring ancient Paganism, a "religion . . .

Again, it was to be expected that the historian would not withhold his fire from the Protestant Reformers, those "fearless enthusiasts,"[1] who were "ambitious of succeeding the tyrants whom they had dethroned."[2] But it needs to be recalled that Gibbon exhibited equal contempt for the zealous attackers of Christianity.[3] Of Voltaire, he exclaimed, "Would he have bestowed the same praise on a Christian prince for retiring to a monastery?"[4]

So concerned was Gibbon over the menace of uncontrolled zeal (as exemplified in the excesses of the French Revolution) and over the mood that could be incited in a mob through the arguments of the freethinkers, that he recognized anew the importance of institutions which exercised a conserving influence in society.[5]

Ecclesiastical controversies.-- It is, therefore, against the background of a fundamental aversion to enthusiasm and zeal of any sort that one must appraise Gibbon's attitude towards Christian zeal in particular. Perhaps there was no single aspect of that

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destitute of theological principles, of moral precepts, and of ecclesiastical discipline," Julian was indefensible (II, 472). For a further discussion of zeal among the Pagans, see II, 126.

1 VI, 132.

2 Ibid., p. 133. Concerning them, he commented caustically, "The nature of the tiger remained the same, but he was gradually deprived of his teeth and fangs."

3 "Nor could I approve the intolerant zeal of the philosophers and Encyclopaedists. They . . . preached the tenets of Atheism with the bigotry of dogmatists, and damned all believers with ridicule and contempt" (Memoir B., p. 204).

4 VII, 146, note. Gibbon added, "In his way, Voltaire was a bigot, an intolerant bigot" (Ibid., p. 146, note). See also V, 391, note, for a contrast between Gibbon's attitude and Voltaire's animosity towards Mohamet.

5 Referring to Burke's refusal to follow the trend of the times, Gibbon wrote: "I can almost excuse his reverence for Church establishments. I have sometimes thought of writing a dialogue of the dead, in which Lucian, Erasmus, and Voltaire should mutually acknowledge the danger of exposing an old superstition to the contempt of a blind and fanatic multitude" (Memoir E., p. 342, note).

subject in which this "most suggestive characteristic" was more clearly evidenced than in his consideration of ecclesiastical controversy. Here, he would contend, was an excellent example of enthusiasm in action, an occurrence accompanied by the most absurd and even comic consequences.

Minute differences in the controversies.-- Gibbon launched the attack by arguing that the actual differences in most if not all theological conflicts were extremely minute. Thus he claimed that the distinction between 'homoousion' and 'homoiousion' was "almost invisible to the nicest theological eye,"[1] and that his study of Arianism had consumed many days of "reading, thinking, and writing, in the pursuit of a phantom."[2]

The significance of Chalcedon appeared to Gibbon to hinge upon equally hair-splitting theological distinctions.[3] The lines were so finely drawn that the critic was moved almost to admiration.[4] By virtue of the same line of reasoning, Gibbon contended that the Church of Rome was placed in a ridiculous position due to the

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1 II, 409, note.

2 Autobiography, p. 185. For a different appraisal of the Arian Controversy, Carlyle's verdict may not be without interest. Carlyle contended that while at first he could attach no real significance to the distinction between 'homoousion' and 'homoiousion', he had at length revised his judgement and concluded that if the Arians had won, "Christianity would have dwindled away into a legend." The writer is indebted for this reference to H. R. Macintosh, Types of Modern Theology (London: Nisbet & Co., 1937), p. 5. One can but observe that such what-would-have-happened-if assertions are incapable of historical verification. For a more recent Christian justification of this controversy, see Neill, op. cit., p. 59 ff.

3 Likewise, the actual basis for the 'filioque' debate appeared to Gibbon to be meaningless. For a fuller statement of his view, and a confirmation by a contemporary Christian theologian, see Appendix 56.

4 "The road to paradise", he wrote in rich imagery, "a bridge as sharp as a razor was suspended over the abyss by the master-hand of a theological artist" (V, 135).

imperceptible difference between Augustine and Calvin.[1]

Extent of bitterness.-- But under the impulse of enthusiasm, the lack of significant difference between contending parties only served to increase the bitterness. Gibbon found that hatred between religious bodies often had existed in inverse proportion to the breadth of the gulf separating them.[2] Thus heretics who had grasped a portion of the Gospel were judged more dangerous enemies of truth than the Pagans who had rejected it altogether;[3] the "Christian" Greeks regarded the "Christian" Latins as "the vilest and most despicable portion of the human race."[4] These unfortunate consequences of "intestine" quarrels prompted Gibbon to make one of his rare direct indictments, as he wrote of those "animated only by the spirit of religion, and that spirit was productive only of animosity and discord."[5] But he was more in character when he commented sardonically: "These rigid sentiments, which had been unknown to the ancient world . . . infused a spirit of bitterness into a system of love and harmony."[6]

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1 Gibbon asserted, "Rome canonized Augustine and reprobated Calvin, while the real differentiation between them is invisible to a theological microscope" (III, 437, note).

2 Gibbon wrote derisively of "the fury of the theological insects who still crawled on the surface of the earth" (V, 147).

3 He observed that to the Christian "the reproach of 'Barbarian' was imbittered by the more odious epithet of 'Heretic' (IV, 87). That this might actually be justified is indicated by a consideration of the concept of the 'demonic', in which Anti-Christ has always to include the 'Christ' element. It is therefore to be feared more than unmitigated evil, since it may pass under the guise of righteousness. See Paul Tillich, The Interpretation of History, trans. N. A. Rasetzki and Elsa L. Talmey (London: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1936), p. 77 ff.

4 VI, 491. Referring to the proud Greek, Gibbon asserted, "He had rather behold, in Constantinople, the turban of Mahomet, than the pope's tiara or a cardinal's hat" (VII, 184-185).

5 VII, 182.

6 II, 28.

Consequences of the controversies.-- In addition to the two previous considerations that the differences were minute, and that the bitterness was in inverse proportion to the extent of the difference, Gibbon had several other observations on ecclesiastical controversy. From such controversy once engaged upon, he argued that it was extremely difficult to be extricated;[1] he claimed that the whole process of subscription and subservience to formal statements of faith was absolutely meaningless;[2] and he intimated that in the last analysis all partisan enthusiasm was temporary and passing.[3] Finally, Gibbon's own credo regarding the significance of ecclesiastical controversy is indicated by his favourable quotation of the testimony of Procopius:

> Religious controversy is the offspring of arrogance and folly, . . . true piety is most laudably expressed by silence, . . . man, ignorant of his own nature should not presume to scrutinize the nature of his God; and . . . it is sufficient for us to know that power and benevolence are the perfect attributes of the Deity.[4]

Criticism.-- How must Gibbon's treatment of the ecclesiastical controversies be evaluated? The first and obvious impression is that Gibbon was not a theologian.[5] By his own ironic admission, it was the theologian's (and specifically not the historian's) task to interpret the significance and character of religion "as she descended from Heaven."[6] Clearly, therefore, while

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1 "As soon," he wrote, "as they [the theologians] beheld the twilight of sense," they "measured back, slipped, and were again involved in the gloom of an impenetrable orthodoxy" (V, 114).

2 "A black or a parrot might be taught to repeat the words of the Chalcedonian or Monophysite creed" (V, 176).

3 For statements to this effect, see Appendix 56.

4 V, 142.

5 The 'value' that Gibbon placed upon theology as a separate discipline was reflected in the following remark: He wrote of "the same ignominious price [a single ducat] , too high perhaps for a shelf of theology . . ."VII, 206).

6 II, 2.

Gibbon's consideration of the effects ecclesiastical controversy had upon the fall of Rome, how "the sense or rather the sound of a syllable was sufficient to disturb the peace of an empire," — while all this properly came within the sphere of his inquiry, the theological significance and importance of the controversies did not.[1] It is thus necessary to concur, in this one area of the inquiry at least, with Bury's judgement: "Neither the historian nor the man of letters will any longer subscribe, without a thousand reserves, to the theological chapters of the 'Decline and Fall'."[2]

But in fairness it ought to be added that Gibbon's distaste did not keep him from a careful and conscientious acquaintance with the whole field of the controversies. And the extent of the investigation, by one to whom the whole subject was alien, testifies to the thoroughness of the historian and must compel the respect and admiration of all but the most bigoted reader.[3] One is tempted to suggest that if he were to discount the clear and unmistakable slant of The Decline and Fall, Bury's "discreet inquirer" could perhaps make a worse mistake than to "go there for his ecclesiastical history."[4]

Further Indictment of Enthusiasm

Gibbon's indictment of Christian enthusiasm was conducted on a far wider canvass than the subject of ecclesiastical controversy, vast as it may be, can indicate. Enthusiasm, he considered not alone the enemy of religion by dividing its adherents into

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1 V, 139.
2 I (1896), xxxix.
3 This fact was recognized by a far from sympathetic critic. See Meinecke, op. cit., p. 252.
4 I (1896), xxxix.

bitterly opposing factions. It was not alone the foe of the state by siphoning off energy that ought to be utilized in the strengthening of the social structure. It led also inevitably to these lamentable consequences:

Disillusionment.-- In its blindness, zeal could not fail, sooner or later, to run into the hard rock of reality. Thus he cited the prayer of a pope that God would guide the hand of his champion. Gibbon added ironically, "After a similar prayer, . . . the Moslems advanced . . ."[1] In the same manner, he wrote of the readiness of the Catholics to put the validity of their cause to a trial by fire. Unfortunately, he observed drily, the expectation that Catholic verity would be sustained by the flames was disappointed.[2]

A compromise of the truth.-- The real effect of enthusiasm, Gibbon argued, was to make loyalty to the object of one's enthusiasm a more pressing consideration than strict truthfulness. In support of this contention, he cited the tendency of Church Fathers to gloss over unfortunate chapters in the history of the Church and to explain them as something other than they actually were.[3] Even more serious than such rationalizations was the inclination, under the impulse of enthusiasm, to be unperturbed by the whole question of truth.[4] Enthusiasm, Gibbon contended, posited a more

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1 VI, 44. The inference was that by the very nature of the expectancy which zeal imposed, someone was certain to be disillusioned.

2 VI, 489. For further instances of disillusionment which resulted from zeal, see VI, 150; and VII, 196. Cf. also Chapter Two of this inquiry.

3 Gibbon cited e.g., Augustine's attempt to defend the Donatist persecution (III, 427).

4 Thus he referred to "the pious fraud, which was embraced with equal zeal at Rome and at Geneva," (IV, 97) and described the

ultimate end than the truth.

The undermining of individual morality.-- Gibbon contended that zeal in religion led not only to the compromise and suppresion of truth but also to a cancellation of considerations of fundamental morality. To substantiate this, he cited the argument of a bishop to the effect that a Christian obligation "annihilates a rash and sacriligious oath to the enemies of Christ."[1] Likewise he contended that in the creed of Justinian, the guilt of murder could not be applied to the slaughter of unbelievers.[2] In short, zealous religion and real morality were frequently found to be incompatible.

The upsurge of intolerance.-- This was the chief item in Gibbon's indictment of Christian zeal. Zeal, he argued, produced bigotry; bigotry begat intolerance; intolerance was the arch-enemy of enlightened humanity.[3] The historian built his case carefully. Intolerance first appeared among the Christians over the question of how to treat those of their own number who persisted in observing Jewish ceremonial law. Quickly, he observed, the Gentiles refused their more scrupulous brethren the same tolerance which they had initially claimed for themselves.[4]

Vatican as "an arsenal and manufacture, which . . . have produced or concealed a various collection of false or genuine, of corrupt or suspicious acts, as they tended to promote the interest of the Roman Church" (V, 292).

1 VII, 150. And he noted another Christian injunction, that it was better to enter a brothel than to abstain from church duties. Cf. V, 296.

2 V, 145. In another passage he pointed to the Church's willingness to "exonerate villains" provided that they sponsored the interest and defence of the Church (III, 232).

3 Was Gibbon indebted to Bayle for this insight? See Appendix 57.

4 In support of this, Gibbon cited the admission of Justin Martyr. (II, 11)

This, however, was but a beginning for the spirit of bigotry. Almost at once it reached out to "the condemnation of the wisest and most virtuous of the Pagans," and there was "delivered over, without hesitation, to eternal torture the far greater part of the human species."[1] This supposition, Gibbon maintained, could unmistakably be deduced from the famous testimony of Tertullian.[2] And these sentiments, Gibbon supposed, reflected not merely the view of a single individual but were indicative of the prevailing mentality of the Christian community.[3]

The spirit expressed by Tertullian persisted through the centuries. Nor was it simply a matter of consigning heretics and unbelievers to eternal punishment. On the contrary, methods designed to compel conformity in the present world were not only countenanced within the Church but came to be regarded with increasing favour whenever such methods could be effectively employed. Thus Gibbon asserted that the first missionaries of the Gospel claimed for themselves the benefits of toleration; but as soon as their religion became recognized and established, they systematically denied the same privilege to others.[4]

Of even more significance was the fact that while the intent remained the same, the effectiveness of persecution advanced with succeeding ages. "Since the death of Priscillian," he wrote, "the rude attempts of persecution have been refined and methodized

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1 II, 28.
2 This testimony is quoted in Appendix 57.
3 Against this, a critic urged that Tertullian was not representative of early Christianity. Cf. Guizot's Edition of The Decline and Fall, I, 194, note. As if in anticipation of such a rejoinder, Gibbon sought carefully to establish the authority of his witness. Cf. II, 29, note.
4 IV, 103.

in the holy office."[1] Nor had there been any apparent awareness that this entire development might be even faintly in contradiction to the principles of Christ, so great was the capacity of zeal to blind the mind and to dull its higher sensibilities.[2] Nor was there an end to the spirit of persecution even in more modern times;[3] it remained even in his own age of Enlightenment.[4]

An evaluation.-- At first glance, Gibbon's treatment of the whole question of ecclesiastical intolerance suggests partisanship. Like any effective polemicist, he seemed to have constructed his case by citing instances which supported his view and by suppressing all which could prompt a contrary conclusion. Thus by dwelling upon particular chapters in Church history, he could create an impression which might have an element of truth in it; but was it true to the totality of the facts?

One might thus argue that Gibbon failed to discern the spirit of charity and forbearance which has been a constant element in the history of the Church. And it might be suggested that had his survey included recognition of all the sainted lives which have been lived under the banner of the Cross, his final conclusion could not have remained the same. He could not have been as persuaded that Christian enthusiasm led inevitably to intolerance.

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1 III, 163.

2 With masterful irony, Gibbon observed, "'May those who divide Christ be divided with the sword,' were the charitable wishes of the Christian Synod" (V, 130).

3 Thus he called Calvin one "who loved liberty too well to endure that Christians should wear . . . other chains than those imposed by himself" (Misc. Works, p. 221).

4 "I could only rejoyce that if the voices of our priests was clamorous and bitter, their hands were disarmed of the powers of persecution" (Memoir E., p. 316). Again, "Whatever may be the language of individuals, it [intolerance] is still the public doctrine of all the Christian churches"; (II, 28, note).

But even when such a rebuttal has been fully considered, the fact remains that Gibbon confronted Christian apologists with a fundamental question: to what extent is the exercise of toleration consistent with the underlying teaching of the Church? Is there not a sense in which 'error' ought not to be tolerated? Why may not the scriptural injunction, "compel them to come in," be advanced in the mind of the Christian as justification for the use of coercion to achieve and maintain the peace and unity of the Church?[1]

The views of later historians.-- These questions have arrested the attention of historians of the Church ever since Gibbon's time. Thus it may not be without purpose to review some of these contributions, to weigh their conclusions against one another, and to ascertain to what extent they confirm or repudiate the verdict which Gibbon reached.

At once one is confronted by a seemingly broad divergence of views. Lord Acton argued that far from being the instigator of intolerance, the Church had frequently been the sole protector of the rights of conscience. This had resulted, Acton reasoned, from the fact that the Church had consistently opposed the state's persistent inclination to encroach upon the freedom and the dignity of the individual.[2]

On the other hand, Acton's successor at Cambridge, J. B. Bury, insisted that the Church had made no contribution to the overthrow of intolerance. He argued that the problem did not concern the Christians at all; that while they claimed the rights of freedom

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1 St. Luke 14:23.

2 John Edward Emerich Acton, History of Freedom and Other Essays (London: Macmillan & Co., 1907), p. 203. A quotation from Acton's book, and an evaluation, are given in Appendix 58.

for themselves, they would have been glad if a government would suppress rival elements in the population.[1]

Now it is evident that Acton and Bury were concerned with two different kinds of freedom of conscience; the former with freedom from political tyranny, and the latter with freedom from the tendency of the Church to suppress views at variance with orthodoxy.

The question which Acton did not answer may be stated thus: granted that the Church has served the cause of liberty by resisting political encroachments upon the individual, what safeguards were there that the Church itself might not be victimized by "man's worldliness, cupidity, and ambition," and as a consequence supplant the state as an instrument of tyranny?[2] Must not this question be involved in any consideration of the claim that the Church has been the ally of freedom of conscience?

But there was equally a question which Bury did not answer. Granted that the Church has been tempted to claim toleration for itself and not for its enemies, why was it that the tradition of liberty and toleration entered into modern times under fundamentally Christian auspices and has been largely confined to that part of the world informed by Christian presuppositions?

A Christian historian has sought to explain these apparent antinomies by asserting a distinction between Christianity and the Church.[3] Over against Bury (and Gibbon), Herbert Butterfield has

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1 J. B. Bury, A History of Freedom of Thought (2d ed.; London: Oxford Press, 1952), p. 35. For a fuller statement of Bury's position, see Appendix 58.

2 This question was posed by Herbert Butterfield, Christianity in European History, p. 30.

3 Herbert Butterfield, History and Human Relations, p. 152 ff.

argued that Christianity operated for the cause of toleration to far greater effect than rationalist critics have realized, to far greater effect indeed than Christians themselves sometimes have desired it to do.[1]

But over against Acton, Butterfield has claimed that the Church, both Catholic and Protestant, has rarely been on the side of toleration.[2] Protestants were no more immune than Catholics to the temptation to capture the government and to coerce that part of the population which insisted on dissenting. But the critic has insisted that this was not the real impact of Christianity but that impact corrupted by ecclesiasticism.[3]

Nor has the effect of genuine Christianity upon the mundane world been obliterated by the Church. This effect has been analysed under three main considerations, all of which "spring from the very nature of the Gospel itself": (a) the leavening effect of Christian charity, (b) the assertion of the autonomy of the spiritual principle, (c) the insistence on the spiritual character of personality.[4] The claim is that these factors have exercised their influence upon the very texture of Western Civilization and insured it the freedom it enjoys.[5]

A validation of Gibbon.-- But this argument, cogent as it may be in itself, has not met the point of Gibbon's central contention: that in the history of the Church, Christian enthusiasm

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1 Butterfield, History and Human Relations, p. 152.
2 Butterfield, Christianity in European History, p. 34. Cf. also Appendix 59.
3 Ibid., p. 35.
4 Butterfield, History and Human Relations, p. 151.
5 A critic has contended that real freedom depends upon two fundamental considerations, co-operation and fellowship, and that Christianity has provided the latter factor. Cf. Macmurray, op. cit., p. 63; also, Appendix 58.

has frequently produced an attitude contrary to Christian charity and entirely irreconcilable with "the insistence on the spiritual character of personality." And while an intolerant attitude may unquestionably be regarded as a corruption of the real spirit of Christianity, there is serious question as to whether it must be understood as a corruption of the fundamental ideology of the Church.[1] Far from supposing such intolerance to be an alien element introduced by man's "worldliness, cupidity, and ambition," one has reason to believe that an attitude of intolerance towards 'error' has been a fundamental ingredient of the 'Church' type of social organization.

Ernst Troeltsch stated the case for the Church in his profoundly sociological analysis of the nature of the 'Church' as distinct from the 'sect' and the 'mystical' types of religious organization.[2] He reasoned that from the Church's standpoint, it had not only the right but the duty to compel unity not simply for its own sake, but for the welfare of its constituents as well as the ultimate interests of mankind. And upon occasion, it might even be necessary to resort to external force in order to insure the

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1 On the other hand, how defensible is the distinction between Christianity and its historical embodiement, the Church? As a contemporary has observed, "Christianity is unthinkable apart from the Church," since "if Christianity is the revelation of the depths of the personal and of love as the ultimate meaning of the universe, it can find expression only in a community." See J. H. Oldham, Life is Commitment (London: SCM Press, 1953), p. 79.

2 Cf. Ernst Troeltsch, The Social Teachings of the Christian Churches, trans. Olive Wyon (London: George Allen & Unwin, 1931) II, 997. Troeltsch wrote, "The attitude of compulsion must . . . finally express itself externally, because error . . . ought not to be tolerated, and because it is not right that people who have been born into the membership of the Church should be allowed to fall a prey of temptation. Here it is permissible to force people for their own good."

attainment of this end.

A conclusion.-- Now a justification of intolerance may be considered legitimate or reprehensible depending upon one's personal viewpoint. One would certainly approach the matter differently if one were an ardent churchman or if one were a convinced rationalist. But the recognition that intolerance is involved inevitably in the distinctively 'Church' type of organization may serve to clarify, not only many chapters in Church history but occurrences in the contemporary world as well.[1] Obviously, the impulse to censure previous ages for their bigotry must be examined against this background: that the persecutors were doing not only what their own age regarded as right, but also what, regardless of the changing conceptions of appropriate means, the Church through the centuries has regarded as aiming at a legitimate end.

Likewise, the present day Protestant tendency to castigate Catholics for their 'intolerance' may be seen as essentially the reaction of the 'sect' to the 'Church' type of religious organization. Nor can it be an occasion of surprise to discover that "in ecclesiastical history it is as rare a thing as in secular history to meet with any abdication of mundane power."[2] Could such an abdication be anticipated when that mundane power might be employed to advance "the peace and purity of the Church"?

This survey of more recent contributions to the subject

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1 It might be argued that the current stress in continental circles on the 'uniqueness' of Christ and the vehement rejection of all tendencies toward syncretism, as well as the closed mentality which characterizes so many of this generation of theological students, may be understood as an extension, in an intellectual or psychological form, of the same fundamental spirit.

2 Butterfield, Christianity in European History, p. 34.

would thus confirm Gibbon's fundamental contention. One may lament the tone which the historian adopted. One may call attention to his utter inability, by means of constructive imagination, to enter sympathetically into the Church's viewpoint. One may wish that, if only for purposes of historical understanding, Gibbon might have approached the matter as a churchman would. One may point to the historian's failure to appraise the leavening influence of Christianity throughout the centuries or the incalculable effect of its insistence upon the dignity of human personality. One may see him hopelessly imprisoned within a narrow, eighteenth century preoccupation with its own brand of liberty and toleration.

Yet no amount of disparagement can blunt his basic insight: that the Church has been on the side of toleration when toleration served its interest and has suppressed 'error' when it was in a position to do so. Real religious liberty, the liberty to remain in 'error' since no mortal system can be trusted in the last analysis to define what is 'true', and since every resort to external compulsion must be deemed a contradiction of the principles of Christ — that liberty has arisen out of the clash of rival religious systems rather than as the bequest of any one of them.[1]

The Idea of Individual Independence

There is yet another factor to be considered in this appraisal of Gibbon's attitude towards ecclesiastical history. It may best be identified as his insistence upon the importance of individual independence. Such independence, the historian regarded

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1 In the thought of this section, the writer is indebted to Herbert Butterfield, The Whig Interpretation of History, p. 100 ff.

as his most prized possession; he referred to it as "the first of earthly blessings."[1] It meant for Gibbon the right of the individual to be free of all external interference.[2] It involved the ability to include in, and exclude from, his life what he would. It implied the unrestricted opportunity to carry out his chosen purposes, to do what he pleased.

An eighteenth century characteristic.-- This habit of mind, it has been contended, was simply a reflection of the eighteenth century faith in itself.[3] It was a concomitant of the confidence in reason, which assumed that all of life could be brought within its domain. Man at last had been emancipated from the fetters which had previously enmeshed his mind. The supposition is that such an age instilled in its sons the assurance that within themselves they possessed sufficient resources to make their way through life, that they could be counted on to conduct themselves properly, and that therefore they required neither assistance nor interference from any outside quarter. At any rate, whatever its origin, this consciousness was clearly in evidence in the historian of the Roman Empire.[4]

Admiration for Julian.-- In support of this contention, a number of considerations can be cited. There was, for example, Gibbon's admiration for Julian. This man, he felt, had the initiative and the independence to pursue a course that was against the

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1 Autobiography, p. 176. Recognition of the importance of this factor to Gibbon has been made by critics of the most diverse schools. See Appendix 59.

2 But this did not imply any desire for independence from the society of friends. See Appendix 59.

3 Cf. Meinecke, op. cit., pp. 254, 255.

4 See Misc. Works, p. 307, for an assertion of his own "independent happiness." And upon the completion of The Decline

trend of the times. Trained in Christianity, brought up to believe, Julian yet asserted the right to formulate his own spiritual destiny. Gibbon observed, "His independent spirit . . . refused to yield the passive and unresisting obedience which was required."[1]

Contempt of crowds.-- In the light of this basic bent of his character, Gibbon's aversion to crowds and masses of people can be explained. When, in The Decline and Fall, he wrote of "a large and tumultuous assembly,"[2] one senses that this was the last place Gibbon himself would care to be. Moreover, when a large group of people degenerated into a mob, Gibbon's distaste assumed the proportions of absolute abhorence.[3]

Attitude towards the state.-- On the strength of this emphasis on the importance of the individual, Gibbon's confusing and seemingly contradictory attitude towards the state can be better understood. It has been cited as somewhat of an anomaly that the historian set such store upon individual independence and yet regarded as the most happy and most prosperous period in the history of the world, the Antonine era of absolute despotism.[4] Gibbon would claim that the contradiction was seeming rather than real.

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and Fall, he wrote: "Not a sheet has been seen by any human eyes, excepting those of the author and the printer: the faults and merits are exclusively my own" (Autobiography, p. 205).

1 II, 458, 459. Struggling in another era, from a different starting point, with radically different weapons, Julian appealed to Gibbon as the great prototype of himself.

2 II, 100. For a further instance of this aversion, see Appendix 59.

3 This is seen in the reaction, reflected in his correspondence, to the excesses of the French Revolution. See Misc. Works, p. 389 ff.

4 One critic claimed that this 'contradiction' was characteristic of the Enlightenment attitude even towards its own age and was never resolved. See Meinecke, op. cit., p. 250.

His conception of acceptable government was that which did not interfere with the individual's pursuit of his own affairs.[1] This he conceived to be quite as possible under an enlightened absolutism as under any other form of government.

But Gibbon was in some perplexity as to what was the best government.[2] It was "a matter of . . . delicacy," he wrote, "to determine with whom the general will ought to be deposited. Shall it reside in the breast of a prince?"[3] That was ideal if the prince was virtuous, but there was the possibility that the prince might be corrupted.[4]

It would seem that he might have leaned towards another form of government which would safeguard against the perils of absolutism were it not for his recognition of another function of government. Not only was government required not to interfere with the rights of the individual; it was also required to prevent other elements in society from so interfering. This was, for Gibbon, the decisive count against democracy. It was unable, he believed, to prevent a breakdown of law and order. It was not, therefore, in contradiction to his love of independence but rather on account of it that Gibbon came down on the side of enlightened absolutism.[5] In his judgement, only under established authority was real

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1 In Macmurray's terms, Gibbon conceived of his freedom as hinging upon a system of co-operation rather than upon a unity of fellowship. Cf. Macmurray, op. cit., p. 102; also Appendix 59.

2 "Britain, perhaps, is the only powerful and wealthy state which has ever possessed the inestimable secret of uniting the benefits of order with the blessings of freedom" (Misc. Works, p. 834.

3 Ibid., p. 217.

4 IV, 177. Cf. also I, 86.

5 For a further indication of Gibbon's ideas on democracy and absolutism as well as current views on the same subject, see Appendix 59.

independence for the individual conceivable.[1]

The menace of ecclesiasticism.-- In view of the extent of Gibbon's devotion to this idea of personal independence, it becomes not only understandable but inevitable that he should have approached ecclesiastical history under the influence of this predisposition of his mind. Early in life, an experience had instructed him that religion could encroach upon his independence. The circumstances issuing out of his conversion to Catholicism, the fact that "the gates of Magdalen College were forever shut" against him,[2] the realization that while nothing actually happened to him other than an 'exile' to Lausanne (imposed by his own father), still he might have come "within the range of a state unemancipated from ecclesiasticism" -- all this conveyed to him at an impressionable age the idea that ecclesiasticism might be incompatible with the independence of the individual.[3]

Apart from any threat of persecution, the Church impressed Gibbon as having a levelling effect, encroaching upon the real uniqueness of the individual in far more subtle fashion, making him think as everyone else thought.[4] Gibbon felt this particularly to be a danger in the writing of ecclesiastical history; for if he adopted the traditional assumptions of faith, the historian

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1 If this was Gibbon's position, there was no such double standard as the critic sought to account for: "Die absolute Norm emfahl die Freiheit, die practische Erfahrung einen wohltatigen Absolutismus, wo dann die Tugend des herrschers auch den Beifall der absoluten Norm ernten konnte" (Meinecke, op. cit., p. 251).

2 Autobiography, p. 49.

3 Ibid., p. xv.

4 Gibbon observed that revelation "in a more enlightened age has satisfied or subdued the reason of a Grotius, a Pascal, and a Locke" (II, 326).

might be expected to come to the same conclusions as a hundred others.[1] In this connection, Gibbon observed that the ecclesiastical historians all seemed to have worn the uniform of the same regiment.[2]

An independent historian.-- This historian was determined to be different. He would strike the balance. The ecclesiastical historians had indicted all Paganism as a mass of corruption. They had magnified the bitterness with which the first Christians were attacked, while betraying their own inability to evince any real sympathy for the vast proportion of the human race.[3] He, Gibbon, was not one of them. He would portray the other side. He would help to put the ledger of the centuries into more accurate and honest order. Incidentally, as an ecclesiastical historian, he would thus vindicate the sense of individuality and independence which resided within him.

A presentiment of limits.-- But was he as certain, as self confident, on this lone and lofty perch as this discussion would seem to suggest? Was he indeed as uncritical of his own presuppositions as critics have commonly assumed? Did he not at times harbour doubts regarding the efficacy of the eighteenth century attitude? Had he not at the last come to question the capacity of 'reason' to supply all the answers which life required?

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1 See IV, 71, for an estimate of the effects of "credulity and submission.

2 Cf. Misc. Works, p. 754. Elsewhere he had written, "Infallible authority allows not the faculties of the mind fairplay." There are "various degrees of slavery . . . . The faith of the Pagan is light and easy, . . . of the Christian binding and comprehensive" (Gibbon, "Hints," No. X., op. cit., p. 196).

3 Actually, Gibbon argued, "The Christians, in the course of their intestine dissensions, have inflicted far greater severities on each other than they . . . experienced from the zeal of infidels" (II, 147).

One critic has surmised as much: "Once the doubt came to him in looking back on his life work, in the midst of the pride of reason, whether he had not in himself rooted out some flower of the imagination, some pleasant errors with the weeds of prejudice."[1] The critic philosophized, "It was a quite gentle contact with currents which were commencing to move contemporaries, an intimation that the Enlightenment was beginning to have a presentiment of limits."[2]

Summary

By way of retrospect, it may be observed that the argument of this Chapter has followed certain easily traceable lines. It has been contended that Gibbon's attitude towards ecclesiastical history was not inspired by a specific animus or antagonism. This contention was supported by citing his conception of history and his purpose to maintain a standpoint of detachment, by indicating that his early life did not produce bitter or hostile sentiments on the subject of religion, and by recalling his readiness to recognize the positive aspects of Christianity. It was seen also that his irony, which has been considered the most objectionable feature of his History, sprang from his detachment; that it was a general weapon; and while it indicated the presence of a bias, it did not imply a particular spite against the Church.

Gibbon's attitude towards ecclesiastical history, it was argued, is to be understood rather in the light of a general feeling for life which was in evidence over the total range of his experience

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1 Meinecke, op. cit., p. 255. The translation is the present writer's. For the critic's own words, see Appendix 59.
2 Ibid.

and observation. Understandably, the historian applied this to the materials of ecclesiastical history.

Prominent in this wider outlook was Gibbon's attachment to the ancient Empire, which has been rightly regarded as the one great enthusiasm of his life. This was established by the circumstance of a youthful interest in classical studies, confirmed by an early visit to the site of the ancient capital, and expanded in the years of maturity. It was further reflected in an attitude of indifference and apparent obliviousness to the world of his own day, and by a recognition that upon the greatness of his subject, his own claim to fame lay. And it was argued that his treatment of Christianity must be traced against the background of his interest in all the factors involved in Rome's decay and fall rather than on the common and erroneous supposition that he had singled out Christianity as the chief cause of the catastrophe.

Equally a part of this general feeling for life, it was contended, was a confidence in reason, shared with his eighteenth century contemporaries. This confidence, combined with a sensationalist epistemology, betrayed him into a dogmatic and unscientific rejection of religious reality which failed to conform to his arbitrary standards of measurement. But the same predisposition prompted him to pioneer in the attempt to trace the 'human' factors involved in the rise of Christianity. And by the ironic device of describing them as 'secondary' causes, he was formally preserved from a dogmatic and scientifically unsupportable dismissal of the Supernatural and its role in history, as usually has characterized rationalist histories, even though it might be argued that this was

the real intent of his work.[1] Equally in evidence in his treatment of ecclesiastical history was his effort to uncover the underlying motives of human behaviour.

It was seen also that distaste for enthusiasm was a pervasive factor in the historian's mentality, influencing his outlook on many subjects. The application to Christianity appeared to be natural and inevitable. Gibbon asserted that Christian enthusiasm instigated profitless and pointless ecclesiastical controversy. (It was pointed out that Gibbon was on questionable ground when, as an historian, he attempted to pass the judgements of a theologian.)

Zeal and enthusiasm, he further contended, led to disillusionment, to a compromise of truth, to an undermining of morality, and finally to an upsurge of intolerance. This latter charge was examined in the light of the views of later historians, and a vindication of Gibbon was indicated.

The final item in the wider outlook was identified as a concern to defend the independence of the individual from all encroachments. This was illustrated in his approach to a number of subjects including his seemingly contradictory attitude towards the state. The historian's conviction that ecclesiasticism could be a further source of such encroachment was another factor in producing an able and articulate critic.

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1 By this device, in other words, the all-important possibility was kept open, the possibility that the Divine may have acted in human history.

CHAPTER V

CONCLUSION

Gibbon was reluctantly acclaimed by Newman as the greatest of the ecclesiastical historians. That verdict has been challenged in recent years, so much so, that even a friendly editor could suggest that in this area, Gibbon's work can no longer be regarded as reliable. What final estimate does the present inquiry warrant? In what sense was Gibbon's treatment of ecclesiastical history defensible? Wherein do its most significant weaknesses and deficiencies lie? Can any permanent importance be attached to his work?

A Defensible Approach

It has been indicated that despite some lapses, Gibbon attempted to provide a scientific approach to ecclesiastical history. By its very nature, science must restrict itself to a description and analysis of observable things. It must be content with the kind of evidence which it is able to evaluate. This means that the scientific historian is not to trace the presence or the activity of the Supernatural in history. His is the more mundane task of ascertaining the observable interconnections of events.

Application to ecclesiastical history.-- But is this approach permissible in the treatment of ecclesiastical history? Today, Christian historians contend that in the field of history there not only may be, but ought to be, a scientific

attitude.[1] What aroused so much antagonism in Gibbon's time is no longer a live issue. By common consent, it is acknowledged that the materials are available for a natural, human account of the rise of Christianity. What Gibbon called 'secondary' causes are clearly traceable; and sociological surveys of the development of the early Church have, in fact, become a commonplace.

Thus in analysing the triumph of Christianity over the Empire, Gibbon was fundamentally right in refusing to be concerned with the 'why' of the event and in concentrating on 'how' it happened. As a critical historian, it was not for him to argue that a satisfactory explanation of the triumph of the Gospel must finally include the agency of the Supernatural,[2] even though conceivably this might be true.[3] Had he been a believer and ascribed the occurrence to the guiding hand of Providence, his work would have had no significance as a critical study. His task, it must be recalled, was to provide an empirical account of the elements which gave Christianity its strength in the Roman world; and this is precisely what he sought to do.

Criticism based upon a misconception.-- It would appear that the major attack upon Gibbon has resulted from the refusal of

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1 See e.g., Herbert Butterfield, History and Human Relations, p. 107; also, Appendix 60.

2 He did assert this (II, 2), but the statement can only be interpreted ironically.

3 A Christian writer has demanded, "Can the events of the Exodus from Egypt or the events associated with the life and death and resurrection of Jesus Christ be so accounted for by the modern historian that he has no need of that hypothesis [that they happened according to the will and through the power and guidance of a Divine Being] ?" Cf. Alan Richardson, Christian Apologetics (London: SCM Press, 1947), p. 91. This argument has suggested that a critical historian can point neither to the need nor to the lack of need, that this hypothesis does not properly come within his sphere at all.

critics to take account of the necessary limitation of a scientific inquiry. The common charge has been that in his treatment of the Christian Church, Gibbon failed to appraise the 'spiritual' factor. He missed "the divine fire at the center."[1] Even a contemporary writer has compared Gibbon's ecclesiastical history to "presenting Hamlet without the prince," or to "a description of a watch which says nothing of the mainspring."[2]

But this is to introduce an element which the scientific historian is specifically pledged not to attempt to assess. No critical study of Christianity can be expected to analyse the contribution of its 'prince'. Gibbon rightly disavowed any such responsibility by referring to his study as an inquiry into the 'secondary' causes of its success. He thus allowed full latitude for the possible operation of a First Cause. And the fact that this allowance was not above the suspicion of irony, and certainly did not reflect the historian's personal view, did not impair its validity in limiting the scope of his study and in keeping it within the bounds of a scientific inquiry.

Propriety of non-Christian treatment.-- Nor is Gibbon to be discounted as an ecclesiastical historian because he was not a Christian. For certain, critics have argued that a writer cannot be a good historian unless he identifies himself with his subject.[3]

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1 John Edward Emerich Acton, Essays on Church and State (London: Hollis & Carter, 1952), p. 431.

2 Michael Joyce, Edward Gibbon, pp. 151-152.

3 Cf. e.g., D. M. Baillie, Faith in God, p. 246; H. R. Macintosh, Types of Modern Theology, p. 5; B. Croce, Theory and History of Historiography, p. 134. For purposes of illustration, the latter argued, "Do you wish to understand the true history of a blade of grass? Try to become a blade of grass" (Ibid., p. 135).

And this is a quality which cannot be claimed for Gibbon's attitude towards ecclesiastical history. Yet one feels that a contribution also may be made by someone who stands apart from the subject as Gibbon did. As a contemporary critic has observed, either understanding is abstract, or it is 'lived'.

> In so far as it is lived, the student will tend to identify himself so completely with the people whom he studies, that he will lose the point of view from which it was worthwhile and possible to study it. What we ordinarily mean by understanding . . . is an approximation . . . which stops short at the point at which the student would begin to lose some essential of his own culture.[1]

Thus the fact that Gibbon did not embrace Christianity could not in itself disqualify him as a student of its history.

A conclusion.-- What is important is that whether he is a Christian or not, the technical historian must regard his study not as ancillary to some further objective but as an end in itself. This inquiry has suggested that while Gibbon never identified himself with Christianity, neither was his treatment marred by specific antagonism against any aspect of it which he was able to evaluate. On the contrary, in carrying out his essential task as a critical historian, he sought to make his scholarship as autonomous as possible.

Should one assume that because he was not a Christian, this historian could make no significant contribution to an understanding of Christian history? Would it not be wiser to conclude with the Christian apologist: "It is possible for scholars who have no

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1 T. S. Eliot, Notes Towards the Definition of Culture (London: Faber and Faber, 1948), p. 41. The critic added: "The man who, in order to understand the inner world of a cannibal tribe, has partaken of the practice . . . has probably gone too far: he can never quite be one of his own folk again" (Ibid., p. 41).

personal interest in the Christian faith . . . to work alongside believing Christian scholars in the task of scientific research"?[1]

Weaknesses and Deficiencies

But there remain vital areas in which Gibbon's work must be augmented and corrected. In his subject as in others, scholarship is continuously advancing. Its conclusions are forever provisional. Thus it is scarcely surprising that not all of the findings of the eighteenth century historian have been acceptable to historians in our own time. A brief indication of these several areas is necessary for a final appraisal of Gibbon's contribution to ecclesiastical history.

Inadequacy of his analysis.-- The most searching, specific criticism of Gibbon as an ecclesiastical historian is that he did not carry far enough his analysis of the factors involved in Christianity's triumph over the ancient world. It is known now that this was an entirely complex phenomenon with endless ramifications and contributing considerations, so much so, that Gibbon's famous five causes only constituted a beginning of a complete explanation.

Later historians have cited as additional factors: the spiritual vacuum in the Empire created by conquest, and the hunger for new units of fellowship following the breakdown of the old activities of home rule; the primary assimilation of the Church group to the Jewish synagogue coupled with the diffusion of Judaism; the kinship between Christian doctrine and Hellenistic syncretism; the wide diffusion of the Mithraic religion and the close analogies

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1 Richardson, op. cit., p. 59. Of interest is the fact that this critic used Gibbon as an illustration of his contention.

between its doctrines and those of Christianity; the extent of economic causation underlying ecclesiastical evolution; the complexity of the process of sociological decay in the Empire which made it powerless to resist the encroachments of a new and vital faith.

For certain, some of these ideas were hinted at by Gibbon, as has been suggested in Chapter Four. But it would appear that the critics were right in contending that he never understood their full significance for the process he was attempting to explain.

Absence of a sympathetic attitude.-- A second major weakness was the absence in Gibbon's ecclesiastical history of what contemporary historians call 'sympathetic imagination'. Granted the propriety of writing the history of the Church from a non-Christian standpoint; yet one feels that for purposes of historical understanding, Gibbon might have entered far more imaginatively than he did into a viewpoint other than his own. But he could not. Much of his treatment of Christianity suggests that he was deficient in this quality of sympathetic imagination.

As a consequence of this limitation, Gibbon was unable to understand the 'private' influence of the Gospel upon the lives of those who professed it. And one may assume that this was a factor which conceivably had some visible influence upon society and therefore might properly come within the sphere of the critical historian's evaluation. It is true that Gibbon appreciated the positive contribution made by the Church to civilization through the centuries far more than most critics have been prepared to acknowledge; yet one does not find in his History an insight into the intimate life of this institution, of "the spiritual work done by

humble men over the face of the earth for fifteen hundred years."[1] Moreover, when an historian has not looked for something and consequently has not found it, it becomes a simple matter to infer that it was not there at all. These inferences were often in evidence in Gibbon's survey of Christian history. The critic was thus sustained in his contention that "Gibbon's contempt for religious feeling and belief rendered him blind to the meaning of many objects which he passed during his long journey."[2]

Unawareness of assumptions.-- This inquiry has indicated finally that in the assumptions that mark his approach to ecclesiastical history, Gibbon was particularly open to criticism. It is known, of course, from F. H. Bradley's great essay, that it is impossible for the historian to function apart from premises and presuppositions which are incapable of validation by any amount of historical research.[3] Thus critical history has certain rules, one of these being that for its purposes, phenomena have always been governed by laws now in operation. By common consent, it does not deal with wholly unique events like miracles. This is an axiom which applies to critical history. It does not prove that miracles cannot occur, nor does it eliminate the possibility of a special revelation. Moreover, as in modern physics, axioms which have proven workable for centuries are sometimes challenged by new findings, and it is found upon occasion that they must be replaced. One cannot thereby dispense with axioms; but they can

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1 Herbert Butterfield, Christianity and History, p. 136.

2 G. P. Gooch, "The Growth of Historical Science," The Cambridge Modern History (1910), XII, 817.

3 Cf. F. H. Bradley, The Presuppositions of Critical History (1874); also Appendix 61.

be held constantly in their true character as principles and not as established facts.

Gibbon's attitude was marked by basic assumptions, but it is not clear that he was always conscious of their status as such. It was, for example, an assumption that knowledge was only ascertainable through reason and the senses. It was an assumption that the criteria of his judgements could be derived from the 'facts' themselves. It was an assumption that since he was not a Christian and had not succumbed to the prejudices of his orthodox predecessors, he was therefore able to provide an unbiased, 'impartial' account of the rise of Christianity. It was finally an assumption that when he had traced the history of this movement, he had achieved its final and complete explanation.

By virtue of this unawareness, Gibbon tended to slip into rationalistic dogmatism and to eliminate the Supernatural not only from critical history, which was proper; but from any claim upon the consciousness of man, which was improper, having no basis other than that it happened to be Gibbon's own belief.

It is true that he did not deny the Supernatural directly. As has been indicated, he specifically recognized the possible fact of a First Cause and thus formally preserved his inquiry from rationalistic arrogance. Yet the irony was so unmistakable, and the attitude of contempt for what could not be measured by the critical historian was so thinly concealed, that the reader has been left in no uncertainty regarding Gibbon's real view.

Now as alien as it may be to the Christian, this view was not objectionable in itself. It would appear that one or another viewpoint is inevitable since, as has been suggested, it is

impossible to approach history apart from a principle of interpretation which history itself does not yield. And there is no reason why a rationalistic interpretation of history is not as permissible as a Christian interpretation.

But what Gibbon did was to claim the authority of critical history for his philosophical appraisal of Christianity. He failed to recognize that critical history itself was neutral, that it substantiated no single philosophy, that rather it supplied materials which could be subjected to varied philosophical interpretation. Gibbon mistakenly supposed that his findings led inevitably to a rationalist's conclusions.

A conclusion.-- That supposition is the principal weakness of Gibbon's treatment of ecclesiastical history. It has been argued that he could not be condemned for not being a Christian. And one ought not to condemn him for bringing his rationalistic ideas to his interpretation of history. But it can and must be suggested that he failed to entertain his assumptions critically; he did not keep them open to revision on the evidence of new insights. One must indeed note that the dogmatism which Gibbon rejected in its religious expression had inserted itself, in a disguised and unconscious manner, into his own attitude towards the spiritual history of the Church.

Lasting Significance

Does Gibbon's work then possess permanent importance? Granted that great advances have been made in his subject; granted that in some essential respects his approach must be corrected; still, is there a sense in which The Decline and Fall remains of

perennial interest to the student of history? This study would suggest an affirmative answer.

An insight into the eighteenth century.-- Gibbon's History has provided the most typical and perhaps the most mature expression of the mentality of the period. Much can be learned about the eighteenth century, its admirations as well as its assumptions, when one reads his account of the Antonine era. And in Gibbon's ecclesiastical history, there is an application of Deistic thinking to the development of a particular religion, an application which is itself of historical importance. As has been suggested, each century supplies a point of view on history which, while it may not be final, is somehow unique and never to be repeated by subsequent ages. For this reason, if for no other, Gibbon ought always to be read.

The importance of more than one approach.-- Gibbon's treatment of ecclesiastical history should be of special interest to those Christians who want a more complete understanding of the history of the Church. For if it is true that the reality of any earthly phenomenon is a many-sided affair, that like a mountain it may be approached from several directions and viewed from more than one perspective, then there is not only opportunity but obvious need for non-Christian as well as Christian appraisals of Church history.[1] As it is important that Christianity be approached from within the framework of faith, so it is important that it be approached from without.

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1 A critic has used the fine analogy of Ben Nevis; cf. C. A. Coulson, Christianity in an Age of Science (London: Oxford University Press, 1953), p. 18 ff.

The critic, therefore, was no more correct in claiming that it was from Tillemont rather than Gibbon that one might derive an understanding of "the spirit of the Christian empire", than it would be to argue that it was from Gibbon rather than Tillemont that this understanding could be gained.[1] The history of Christianity is complex. As Tillemont may have introduced the reader to the intimate life of the Church in a sense that could not be derived from Gibbon, so Gibbon's book has remained a view of a side of ecclesiastical history which orthodox historians had traditionally failed to comprehend.

Validation by later students of Church history.-- But in another sense, Gibbon's permanent importance is due to the fact that his successors in ecclesiastical history have comprehended the validity of the approach which he, together with Voltaire and Hume, employed; and these later writers have altered their own treatment of Christian history in a manner which, while not mimicing the Enlightenment historians, unmistakably took them into account.

Perhaps the most notable effect was the recognition of the need for complete candour in ascertaining the facts. Among scholars of the nineteenth century, there was growing awareness that as a matter of historical research, the facts of ecclesiastical history did not differ from the facts of civil history; in other words, that Gibbon's sociological approach was the only possible scientific approach to the history of Christianity.

Thus freed from the restraints of piety, Christian historians have arrived at conclusions which are astonishingly similar

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1 Dawson, op. cit., p. 12.

to those of Gibbon. It is now freely acknowledged, for example, that the Church has frequently erred, that it has often been responsible for a policy of cruel persecution, that in no sense has it been exempt from that 'downward pull of life' which has introduced factors of cupidity and ambition into all of human history.

Apologists have argued that all the faults which properly can be laid at the door of the Church have not been able to destroy the spirit of Christ within it; that what is amazing is that Christianity has survived in spite of all; that Church history can be regarded as a "record of frustrated hopes which were powerless to retard the progress of the Faith."[1] But this argument, valid as it may be in itself, is actually an acknowledgement of the justice of Gibbon's general indictment, indicating that it was based not so much upon antagonism as upon fact.

Even more astonishing is the realization that some of the dialectical theologians of our own time, after contemplating upon the course of the last two thousand years, have concluded that the world since Christ came is in no sense visibly different "in a way that can be traced empirically by the historians."[2] This surely is a view which could be derived as an inference from The Decline and Fall far more readily than from the apologetic writings of Gibbon's generation.

Granted that it probably cannot be proven that the historical scepticism of theologians like Barth and Bultmann is directly traceable to the historians of the Enlightenment; yet the fact remains

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1 Frederick John Foakes Jackson, A History of Church History (Cambridge: W. Heffer & Sons, 1939), p. 11.

2 D. M. Baillie, God was in Christ (London: Faber & Faber, 1948), p. 76.

that history is woven of one piece; and the alteration of historical mentality which was accomplished by Voltaire and Gibbon, no matter how discredited in detail or even in underlying philosophy, can never be erased from the consciousness of subsequent generations.

A contribution to the understanding of faith.-- It is contended that inadvertently Gibbon contributed to an understanding of the real basis of Christian faith. Through the centuries there had been a continuous tendency to rely on history as a support for faith. In Gibbon's own time, Joseph Priestley argued that the Resurrection and the miracles of the Apostolic period were supported by sufficient evidence, that all one need do was examine, by the known rules of estimating the value of testimony, whether the evidence of Christianity did not stand on as good ground as that of any other history whatsoever.[1] Gibbon argued that "the faith as well as the virtue of a Christian must be formed and fortified by the inspiration of Grace."[2]

Gibbon was right. From an historian's standpoint, it is now recognized that no historical religion can be established by trying to take from technical history the authority it possesses. Thus while Gibbon was mistaken in rejecting the possibility of miracle because it fell outside the sphere of his inquiry, he was correct in contending that supernatural events could not be validated by the methods of scientific history.

An even stronger argument, from the Christian standpoint,

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1 Cf. Joseph Priestley, An History of the Corruptions of Christianity (2d ed.; Birmingham: J. Thompson, 1793), II, 459.

2 Memoir C., p. 250. For current views on this subject, see Appendix 62.

stems from the nature of faith itself. For clearly, supernatural happenings which were verifiable by the critical historian would eliminate the need for faith, since acceptance of them could be assured without it. By contrast, Christian faith is founded upon events in history which are interpreted through believers' eyes. It rests upon occurrences which have a date and a place, and are therefore 'historical';[1] but it recognizes that the supernatural significance of these occurrences is reserved for the supernaturally minded.

Christian faith, in short, is not assent to empirically verifiable, historical 'facts'. It is rather a venture of life on the supposition that one's belief about these 'facts' is true. Nor, according to traditional theology, will this venture be made apart from a prior prompting of the Divine Spirit.

Gibbon would undoubtedly argue that this was a case of making virtue out of necessity. He would contend that the forces of faith were required to retreat from the field of history and had set up their flag where critical history could no longer attack it. He would insist that this was not the way Christians through the centuries had looked upon the 'historical' element in their faith.

He would not be right. An insight into the real nature of faith has been present from the foundation of the Church, long

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1 The German terms, 'historisch' and 'geschichtlich' are more helpful than the single English word 'historical'; 'historisch' referring to what can be established by the historian's criticism of the past; and 'geschichtlich' describing those happenings in history whose meaning alone is discernible through the eyes of faith. This is R. Bultmann's interpretation of these terms. Cf. Kerygma and Myth, trans. Reginald Fuller (London: S.P.C.K., 1953), p. xii.

before the emergence of critical history. The earliest Gospel asserted it. St. Paul claimed that no one could say Jesus is Lord except by the Holy Spirit.[1] To Christ, it would have been inconceivable that things of the spirit could be apprehended apart from the believing mind. Through the intervening years, the Church has officially maintained this understanding apart from whatever current attitudes towards history happened to be.

Yet it is also true that the New Testament conception of faith had often been lost, and the illusion had grown that Christianity as an historical religion should be historically verifiable; that the Supernatural's role in history ought in some sense to be evident for all to see.

Is it too much to suggest that a halt to this disastrous tendency and a return to the real, spiritual character of the venture of faith, was aided inadvertently by men like Gibbon who, while they themselves could not believe, saw more clearly than many believers what could not be the basis of faith?

In conclusion.-- There is a wise saying that God need not grudge even his enemies their virtues. These words could be applied to Edward Gibbon, the ecclesiastical historian. By tracing the history of the Church in all its essentially human character, he performed a service which may linger long after men have forgotten the source from which it came.

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1 I Corinthians 12:3.

APPENDIX

ADDITIONAL NOTES BY THE WRITER

1. The role of the historian in history.

J. B. Bury, who had claimed that history is no more and no less than a science, admitted in 1907 that "History is, in the last resort, somebody's image of the past, and the image is conditioned by the mind and experience of the person who forms it" (Autobiography, p. xiv). This view has been echoed many times since. Perhaps there has been no clearer statement than that by Fritz Medicus in an article "On the Objectivity of Historical Knowledge," Philosophy and History, p. 154: "Wherever historical research is exercised, there it is done on the basis of the personal history of the man who is striving after such knowledge."

2. General characteristics of the eighteenth century.

It has been claimed that in the history of human thought, there has been no more ambiguous term than 'nature'. That assertion is easily illustrated in the eighteenth century. At one point there was a disposition to equate the laws of nature and the laws of 'reason' and to argue that these laws would be acknowledged as just and right by all men, just like axioms of mathematics. But this characterized the early part of the period. Towards the close of the century, the tendency was to identify nature with man's instincts and emotions. It would appear however that Gibbon leaned towards the earlier view. Similarly, it has been claimed that historically, nature referred to things as they now are or have become, whereas philosophically, it meant things as they may become. Cf. Willey, The Eighteenth Century Background, p. 108. Both of these meanings were present in the thought of Gibbon.

Critics have mistakenly assumed that the age had revolted "not only against the power of institutionalized religion, but against religion as such" (Collingwood, The Idea of History, p. 76). In his summary of the thought of Voltaire and Hume, whom he argued were the typical expressions of the period's outlook, the critic stated their view thus: "It [religion] was sheer error, due to the unscrupulous and calculating hypocrisy of a class of beings called priests, who . . . invented it to serve as an instrument of domination over the masses of men" (Ibid., p. 77). But there is a question how representative these writers were. The seventeenth century had been a time of great transition which had challenged men's faith in the Supernatural. Out of it had emerged a mood of uncertainty and a disposition to challenge traditional assumptions; this mood may have been an embarrassment to religion, but that

embarrassment need not be interpreted as open hostility. Cf. Butterfield, Christianity in European History, p. 36 ff.

3. The Enlightenment idea of history.

Croce contended that Voltaire was the typical expression of Enlightenment historiography. And he summarized Voltaire's approach thus: "It is not for history . . . to trace human splendour and miseries, but only . . . manners and arts, that is, . . . the positive work." But was this "the principal object of all historic labours of the period" (Theory and History of Historiography, p. 245)? It is difficult to understand how this generalization could include Gibbon, the historian of "the crimes, follies, and misfortunes" of mankind (I, 84).

In the Autobiography (p. 179), Gibbon had written, "History is the most popular species of writing, since it can adapt itself to the highest or lowest taste." But not everyone shared this view as is indicated by this quotation by Boswell from Dr. Johnson: "Great abilities are not requisite for an historian; for in historical composition all the greatest powers of the human mind are quiescent. He has facts ready to his hand; so there is no exercise of invention . . ." And John Baillie, who cited this passage (The Belief in Progress, p. 165), argued that "this was the notion of history generally prevailing in the English empirical tradition of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries" (Ibid.). Boswell further reported a bit of dialogue: "Johnson remarked: 'All the colouring, all the philosophy of history is conjecture.' BOSWELL: 'Then . . . you would reduce all history to no better than almanack.' Mr. Gibbon, . . . was present; but he did not step forth in defence of that species of writing. He probably did not like to trust himself with Johnson." But Boswell was scarcely a trustworthy reporter, at least on Gibbon, whom he despised.

4. The Deistic approach to religion.

The Deists depended upon 'reason' as an infallible guide in religion, but it was never specifically defined. What was it? "The common assumption was that everyone knew. In each human mind there is to be found an ascertainable outfit of intellectual, moral and religious convictions whose validity is a matter of universal agreement" (Macintosh, Types of Modern Theology, p. 16).

The age was not consistent in the application of its scepticism, and this fact led to curious discrepancies. As a critic has argued, "There was nothing which shackled the imagination in the time-honoured legend of miraculous assistance vouchsafed to the Hebrew Joshua. But it was no more believed that the same power would help the strategy of Marlborough" (Stephen, English Thought, I, 178). And Canon Raven observed (Science and Religion, p. 170), "It is . . . a clear indication of the lethargy of the eighteenth century that . . . there had not been a clash over Genesis." The critic argued that the age had the materials for such questioning in the studies of fossils made by Ray, but that it failed to grasp the obvious implications.

5. The impact of external circumstances.

Gibbon's father was not sympathetically portrayed in the Memoirs, the Journal, or the Correspondence. One senses a great gulf between the generations. The picture the son provided was of a man uneasy and inconstant, usually good natured, but given to moments of harshness, moroseness, and unreasoning obstinacy. Gibbon had no difficulty seeing his father's likeness in the 'Flatus' of W. Laws' Serious Call. See Memoir A., p. 382.

Oxford registered an impression upon Gibbon which, in its negativeness, would be difficult to equal and impossible to exceed. "Of all the years of my life, the fourteen months . . . at Oxford were most completely lost for every purpose of improvement" (Memoir C., p. 225). He observed that this was an ecclesiastical institution; yet "without a single lecture . . . Christian or Protestant, I was left by the dim light of my catechism to grope my way to the chapel" (Autobiography, p. 45). The main method of teaching was by tutoring; yet in Gibbon's case, "Dr. --- well remembered that he had a salary to receive and only forgot that he had a duty to perform" (Ibid., p. 44). One critic has argued that part of the difficulty was in Gibbon himself, citing as 'proof' a statement by one of Gibbon's instructors (a John Byrom) to the effect that "Gibbon is so slow" (Meredith Read, Historic Studies, II, 266). But there is nothing either in Gibbon's later achievement or in his early record to substantiate this supposition; whereas there is much that supports "the presumptuous belief that neither my temper nor my talents were averse to the lessons of science" (Memoir C., p. 225).

The same critic contended (p. 348) that "for the sake of Gibbon and the world at large, it was a great misfortune that he did not marry Suzanne Curchod, arguing that "the purity and elevation of her character" and "her deeply religious nature" would have moulded him "in a spiritual direction." But one wonders what would have happened to the distinctive edge of the History had he become a devout Christian. Another critic (D. M. Low, Edward Gibbon, 1737-1794), has suggested that the lady herself was not above reproach, and that the promptness of her marriage to another indicates that her own heart was not too deeply involved in the affair.

Gibbon often indicated a derogatory attitude towards women, whom he identified as the chief supporters of superstition; and ironic tribute was paid to "the sex most prone to devotion" (V, 295). At times, the jibe was direct and open; e.g., " . . . God and the ladies (I blush to unite such discordant names)" (II, 293). Perhaps it was this attitude which prompted Porson's famous comment: "Nor does his humanity ever slumber, except when women are ravished or the Christians persecuted" (Letters to Mr. Archdeacon Travis, p. xxviii).

While the main impact of his travels was undoubtedly positive, some of the effects may not have been beneficial. Thus a critic (Quennell, Four Portraits, p. 103), charged that Gibbon's early visit to Venice and the distaste he acquired there for the traces of Byzantium with which that city was encrusted, were responsible for his failure to do justice to the eastern empire. The failure adequately to treat the eastern empire is a fact; but this explanation of the cause of it is hardly more than a conjecture.

The importance of the military service to the future historian is supported by the testimony of a modern critic (H. Temperley, Research and Modern History, p. 5); in contrasting the several bases of scepticism of Nero's famous march to the Metaurus, this writer observed that whereas Macauley based his position on internal evidence, "Gibbon was able to point out that a march of two hundred forty miles in six days or an average of about forty miles per day was far beyond the capacity of any modern army. Gibbon had tramped with the militia over the muddy roads in Kent and Hampshire." The critic added, "Had Macauley ever been a captain of the Hampshire grenadiers, he would have known of better arguments than those he used."

6. The individuality of the historian.

It has been aptly observed that "historians are born, not manufactured." The same writer (G. M. Trevelyan, Clio, A Muse, p. 193), asserted, "The young historian must depend . . . on his own initiative for which no organization of research and no kindness of older persons can ever provide a substitute."

There is a possibility of over-estimating Gibbon's independence of his age. Thus A. H. Thompson (Gibbon, p. 9) has asserted, "In the whole history of English literature, there is no figure which is so entirely isolated from external influence, so sufficient to itself as that of Gibbon." But in view of the historian's reflection of so many of the attitudes and assumptions of the age, it is difficult to see how this statement can be substantiated.

Gibbon was entirely sceptical regarding the lasting effects of preaching. He observed, "The preacher will dismiss his assembly full of emotions, which a variety of other objects, the coldness of our northern constitution, and no immediate opportunity of their exerting their good resolution, will dissipate in a few moments" (Journal, p. 127).

The historian's approach to the study of languages illustrated the methodical bent of his mind. He reported that he would translate some passage of Latin or French into the opposite language; then, after putting the original text out of his memory, he would return his copy into the primitive idiom, comparing its defects "with the ease and grace of the original," and repeat the practice until he had acquired mastery not only of the externals but of the theory and inner workings of Latin and French composition (Autobiography, p. 68).

The variety of Gibbon's information was almost endless. An examination of his unpublished papers in the Manuscript Room of the British Museum indicates an interest in such unrelated subjects as the belief in immortality among the primitive peoples of Mexico, and the identity of the man in the iron mask (whom he believed to be the bastard of Anne of Austria and Cardinal Mazarin). And in the Miscellaneous Works, there are comments upon "the height of the Chimborazo, the temperature of molten lava, the hatching of eggs, the habits of bees and fishes, the plants of Switzerland, the climate of Siberia and Iceland" (cited by Black, The Art of History, p. 156).

"It has always been my practice," Gibbon wrote, "to cast a long paragraph in a single mould, to try it by my ear, to deposit it in my memory, but to suspend the action of the pen til I had given the last polish to my work" (Autobiography, p. 185).

7. The meaning of 'philosophy of history'.

To illustrate Troeltsch's distinction between two major types of philosophy of history: the classical example of the metaphysical conception was St. Augustine; and a contemporary representative was Benadetto Croce with his theory of developmentalism. Croce contended that the fundamental reality of history and of nature and of the world is spirit (History of Historiography, p. 312). But he also argued that there was no philosophy of history "in the sense of a pre-determined plan or of an hegelian dialectic" (History of Europe in the Nineteenth Century, p. 112). There was only a pattern which followed "the central eternal truth of liberty." A contemporary exponent of the empirical approach is G. H. Renier; cf. his History, Its Purpose and Method. But Troeltsch's bi-partite distinction has not been acceptable to all; thus Collingwood (op. cit., p. 1) argued that "a third use of the phrase is found in several nineteenth century positivists for whom the philosophy of history was the discovery of general laws governing the course of events which it was history's business to record." But even in the limited, empirical sense, the phrase has still been attacked; the contention was that it contained 'incongruity' and 'superfluity' since the conception of history already involved philosophy, "nor can one philosophize without referring to events which are historical" (Croce, History as the Story of Liberty, p. 140). For an exposition of the general topic, cf. Raymond Aron's Article on "The Philosophy of History" in the Chambers Encyclopaedia.

Professor Paul Tillich wrote: "In dealing with the philosophy of history, it is impossible to avoid the Christological problem. History and Christology belong to one another as do question and answer" (Religiose Verwirklichung, cited by J. Baillie, Our Knowledge of God, p. 186). What is meant is that one cannot approach history apart from a principle of interpretation; the historian must either accept or reject Christ as the center of history; thus Christ is or is not the historian's principle for judging history, a fact which involves him inevitably in the Christological question. This is undoubtedly true but useless for apologetic purposes. The same claim could be made for Marxism; either one accepts or rejects a Marxist interpretation of history; thus does not the relationship between history and Marxism become equally indissoluble? Gibbon would have had similar objections to the contention advanced by D. M. Baillie in God was in Christ (p. 71): "History has no ultimate meaning . . . unless some temporal point or points in it can be found to possess an absolute significance in the 'prophetic' or 'eschatological' sense . . ." Gibbon undoubtedly would have replied, 'then history has no ultimate meaning.'

8. Gibbon's methodology of history.

Christian scholars have agreed that to seek freedom from

preconceptions is a worthy aim for a critical historian. Alan Richardson (Christian Apologetics, p. 104) argued, "The historian neither starts nor ends with a philosophy of history, and he has no interest in making facts fit into preconceived theories." And Herbert Butterfield (History and Human Relations, p. 101) concurred: "The technical historian is willing to jettison for the time being his private views and personal evaluation. He performs an act of self-emptying in order to seek the kind of truth which does not go further than the tangible evidence warrants . . . the kind of truths which the evidence forces us to believe whether we like it or not."

Gibbon's devotion to 'truth' was reflected in many statements: "Exact and impartial, he [the historian] yields only to that authority which is the rationale of facts"; (Misc. Works, p. 643); "A strict and inviolable adherence to truth is the foundation of everything virtuous and honourable in human nature" (Ibid., p. 715); "A friend to truth, he seeks only for those kinds of truth that are appropriate to his subject, and with these he is content" (Ibid., p. 642).

The distinction Gibbon made between history and chronicle did not lead him to Macauley's conclusion that "facts are the mere dross of history. It is from the abstract truth that interpenetrates them and lies latent among them, that the mass derives its value" (Macauley's Works, p. 31, cited by Lord Acton, Lectures on Modern History, p. 321). For Gibbon, there was no abstract truth in history, but only concrete truths; he was merely acknowledging that these latter were not of equal importance, and for this reason alone, were not in themselves sufficient for the writing of history. On the other hand, recognition of the distinction is sufficient to suggest the over-simplification of Coleridge in contending: "Ideas alone without facts would be mere philosophy; facts alone without ideas of which these facts are symbols would be mere history" (Table Talk, cited by Acton, Ibid., p. 328). It might be rewarding to make a study of the use of the word 'mere', 'mere' man, 'mere' reason, 'mere' history, to convey loaded judgements which often are not nearly as obvious as is implied. An adequate answer to Coleridge is available in Croce's comment: "Ordinary history is already philosophical history. It contains philosophy inside itself in the shape of predicates to its judgements" (History of Historiography, p. 207).

Ernst Troeltsch struggled with the problem of the proper relationship between the materials of history and the principle of their evaluation. He wrote: "We are confronted by a logical cycle. We must interpret history by the degree to which it approximates ethical values, and at the same time we must derive these ethical values from history. The difficulty can be solved only by the thinker's own conviction and certainty that amid facts, he has really recognized [one wonders how he can ever be sure] the tendencies that make for ethical ideals, and that he has truly discerned the dynamic movement and progressive tendency of the historic process" (Historiography, op. cit., p. 722). Against this, it may be argued that "the historical judgement is not related to value in general but always to a concrete and specific form of value, varying according to the general conception of the epoch and the particular cultural background of the historian" (Klibansky, Article in Philosophy and History, p. 335).

The tendency of modern thought has been to regard the materials of history and the principle of their evaluation not only as associated but as inseparable. Croce (History as the Story of Liberty, p. 22) wrote: "In those works of history in which the standards of interpretation are fitted to the facts to be interpreted, so that a single life pulsates, the facts and the theory demonstrate each other." Moreover, technical historians continue to insist upon the primary importance of the concrete materials of history. One critic described them as "the yardstick that would have given them [the historians bent on theorizing] the measure of their loss" (Butterfield, The Study of Modern History, p. 10).

Gibbon's attitude of aloof superiority provoked sharp reproaches from critics: Charles Oman (Memories of Victorian Oxford, p. 160) contended, "Occasionally one meets with a book written from the point of view of a superior person, who looks upon the motions of mankind with the sort of feeling with which we watch the apparently objectless activity of insects. Gibbon had this sort of mentality." A. H. Thompson (Gibbon, p. 12) wrote, "His coldness of disposition became a tranquility superior to the assaults of passion." And Collingwood (The New Leviathan, p. 357) called Gibbon "hardheaded."

9. The historian on human nature.

It has been suggested that human nature was conceived of 'substantiallistically', as though it were something static, "an unvarying substratum underlying the course of historical changes and all human activities" (Collingwood, The Idea of History, p. 82). But can it be claimed that the real purpose of history, for the eighteenth century, was not to record and learn facts, but to discover "the general nature of man"? Cf. Willey, op. cit., p. 83. At any rate, in this generalization, it would be difficult to include Gibbon's primary passion to 'ascertain the facts'.

Gibbon was appealing to the moral core in man when he argued that "the man who will not expose his life in defence of children has lost the first energies of nature" (VII, 181).

In an effort to provide a 'human' explanation for the morality of the early Church fathers and the growth of ecclesiastical government, the historian asserted that there were two natural human 'propensities', the love of pleasure and the love of action. Since the former was repressed by rigid Christian moralism, the latter, intensified by the stifling of the pleasure impulse, found an adequate outlet in the organization of the Church (II, 37). At times, his interpretation of human motivation was entirely mechanistic: "The mechanical operation of sounds, by quickening the circulation of blood and spirits, will act on the human machine more forcibly than the eloquence of reason and honour" (VII, 199). And beneath the surface of humanity, he saw natural factors constantly in operation: "In the vigour of health, his [the barbarian's] practice will contradict his belief, until the pressure of age or sickness, or calamity, awakens his terrors, or compels him to satisfy the double debts of piety and remorse" (VII, 224). There are also instances in which he noted the tendency of human beings to emulate national characteristics. Thus in his discussion of the impact of Christianity upon Paganism, he observed: "The natives of Syria and Egypt abandoned their lives to lazy and contemplative

devotion; Rome again aspired to the dominion of the world" (VI, 115).

Critics have contended (e.g., Toynbee, The Study of History, abr. p. 260) that Gibbon did not realize that the decline of the Empire was inherent in its rise; yet the historian had written: "Injury will produce hatred, and hatred will find the opportunity of revenge" (IV, 104). Again, "All conquest must be ineffectual unless it could be universal, since the increasing circle must be involved in a larger sphere of hostility" (V, 310). Emphasis upon the moral element in history is equally evident; thus he cited the remorse of Constans which "pursued him by land and sea, by day and night" (V, 189). Of Montasser, he wrote: "In a reign of six months, he found only the pangs of a guilty conscience" (VI, 50). Likewise, the path of ambition was weighed and found wanting: "He Andronicus the Younger gathered the fruits of ambition, but the taste was transient and bitter." Again, Frederick advanced on a career of triumph til he was unfortunately drowned in a petty torrent" (VI, 345). But from this awareness, Gibbon did not proceed to a conception of history as a moral teacher, nor would he have subscribed to Acton's contention that the achievement of history was to develop, perfect, and arm the conscience.

10. His idea of the unity of history.

That Gibbon succeeded in conveying the impression of history's essential unity is suggested by the concessions of critics: "The initial merit of Gibbon's book is its recognition of the continuity of history" (Thompson, op. cit., p. 13). "Mannigfaltigkeit und Einheit zugleich dieser Volkergemeinschaft wurden, wie von Ranke, so auch schon von Gibbon freudig bemerkt" (Meinecke, op. cit., p. 249). "It was his immortal achievement to show how the Roman Empire lived on" (George Gooch, "Historiography," The Chambers Encyclopaedia).

If retrogression was actually Gibbon's 'guiding idea', it suggests a fundamental difficulty in classifying him. For the eighteenth century has been heralded as the age of complacency, and its belief in the constantly progressive operation of the good principle, is held to be expressive of that mood. Cf. J. Baillie, The Belief in Progress, p. 46, ff., for an exposition of the various manifestations of this belief in the late eighteenth century. Yet here was a supposedly 'typically eighteenth century historian sounding the discordant note. The attempt to classify Gibbon has led to other strange conclusions. Fueter (Historiographie, p. 363) listed him as belonging to "Die Schule Voltaires in England"; whereas Gibbon's contempt for Voltaire has already been indicated. And Algernon Cecil identified him as one of Six Oxford Thinkers; what possible influence Oxford had upon Gibbon has escaped the attention of this writer. Cf. Chapter One and Appendix 5.

Some passages of the History clearly attest to the historian's confidence in progress: e.g., "The monuments of art may be destroyed at a single blow, but the immortal mind is renewed by the copies of the pen" (VII, 122). "The fabric of science might be destroyed, but the more useful and necessary arts would certainly survive"

(Ibid., p. 209). "The invention of the art [of printing] derides the havoc of time and barbarians" (Ibid., p. 207).

Similar in character were the expressions of his optimism: "Partial events cannot essentially injure our general state of happiness . . . . The experience of four thousand years should enlarge our hopes and diminish our apprehensions. We cannot determine to what heights the human species may aspire in their advances towards perfection; but it may safely be presumed that no people, unless the fact of nature be changed, will relapse into their original barbarism" (IV, 176, 180).

J. Baillie (op. cit., p. 21) wrote: "Lucretius, Seneca, St. Augustine . . . all took what moderns would regard as a pessimistic view of the general course of our mortal life, yet each had his own solace, finding something good to which his soul might cleave."

Lois Whitney (Primitivism and the Idea of Progress) has argued that eighteenth century English novelists subscribed to the idea of progress and to theories of human perfectivility and at the same time held to theories of the superiority of primitive man and of man's natural goodness. The further contention was that this confusion was not only evidenced in the novelists, e.g., Charlotte Smith, but was a part of the mentality of the period.

11. Gibbon and the conception of Providence.

As pervasive as Gibbon's irony was, some of his statements about God appear to have been perfectly straight-forward. Thus he observed: "The God of nature has written his existence in all his works" (V, 362). "The unity of God is an idea most congenial to nature and reason" (Ibid.) And in the Essai, he had cited "the correct, simple, and universal feeling that there is a power superior to mankind" (Misc. Works, p. 662).

The historian complained of the heedlessness "of the prophet Jesus" to the call "to avenge the impious mockery of his name and religion" (VII, 150). And he observed sardonically, "Their divine patroness was deaf to their entreaties" (Ibid., p. 196). The only possible inference was that "from the vicissitudes of success, the monarchs [and religious devotees as well] might learn to suspect that heaven was neutral in their quarrel" (VI, 355).

Illustrative of Adam Smith's contention about salutary effects flowing from selfish causes was Gibbon's argument that "among the causes that undermined the Gothic edifice, a conspicuous place must be allotted to the crusades" (VI, 465); and yet the crusades were responsible for the emancipation of the poor: "The conflagration which destroyed the tall and barren trees of the forrest gave air to the vegetation of the smaller and nutritive plants of the soil" (Ibid.) But could it not equally be argued that evil can emerge out of good? Cf. Butterfield, Christianity and History, p. 38 ff., for illustration of this supposition. One suspects that only a Being with insight greater than man's, even greater than a philosophic historian's, can finally assess the significance of any event in history.

Is not a sense of providential deliverance suggested by the

following: "Greece might have been overwhelmed, with her schools and libraries, before Europe had emerged from the deluge of barbarism; the seeds of science might have been scattered by the winds before the Italian soil was prepared for their cultivation" (VII, 122)?

12. The historian and his predecessors.

The problem of the proper relationship between the historian and his predecessors has occupied contemporary students of history. Collingwood (The Idea of History, p. 238) has argued against the conception of history out of external authorities: "As he [the historian] becomes more and more master of his craft and his subject, they [the predecessors] become less and less his authorities, and more and more his fellow students, to be treated with respect or contempt according to their deserts." He further argued that there was no such thing as an "authority" in the traditional sense, that even when an historian accepted what his predecessors told him, he accepted it "not on their authority but on his own, not because they say it, but because it satisfies his criteria of historical truth." And one critic (Croce, History as the Story of Liberty, p. 61) has claimed that evidence does not exist apart from this evaluation: "History is based on a synthesis of two things which exist only in that synthesis, evidence and criticism."

13. General features of Gibbon's treatment.

The historian often acknowledged his dependence upon his predecessors: "Nor may the artist hope to equal or surpass til he has learned to imitate the work of his predecessors" (VII, 137). "I have never denied . . . my obligation to modern glasses, more especially to the incomparable microscope of Tillemont" (Memoir E., p. 303). "I am not ashamed to confess myself the grateful disciple of the impartial Mosheim" (Misc. Works, p. 748). And as he entered into the discussion of theological history, he observed, "In the contemplation of a remote object, I am not ashamed to borrow the aid of the strongest glasses" (V, 103, note).

That Gibbon had a sense of great difficulty in recovering the essentials of early ecclesiastical history is indicated by the following: "The obscure and imperfect origin of the western churches has been so negligently recorded that if we would relate the manner of their foundation, we must supply the silence of antiquity . . . with legends . . ." (II, 67). Again, "Without descending into a minute scrutiny of the expressions or the motives of those writers who . . . record the progress of Christianity in the east, it may be observed that none of them have left us any grounds from which a just estimate can be formed" (Ibid., p. 62).

14. The handling of Tillemont and Mosheim.

One of the most common uses which Gibbon made of Tillemont was to support a contention by citing his predecessor's references to authoritative writings of antiquity. Thus he observed, "According to the Donatists, whose assertion is confirmed by the tacit acknow-

ledgment of Augustine, Africa was the last of the provinces which received the gospel" (II, 66, note). Tillemont had written, "Les Donatistes pretendoient que L'Afrique avoit receu la foy, au la derniere, ou au moins l'une des dernieres. S. Augustin le confirme plutoit que de le nier . . . Tertullien dit aussi que les Églises d'Afrique estoient posterieures à celles de Grece fondées par les Apostres ou par des hommes apostoliques. Et on tire la mesme chose de quelque endroits de S. Augustin. (On ne trouve rien de l'Afrique dans l'histoire de l'Église que sur la fin du deuxieme siecle.)" Cf. M. Lenain Tillemont, Memoires pour servir a L'Histoire Ecclesiastique des six Premiers Siecles, I, 525. Interesting also are the instances in which Gibbon not only reproduced the substance of what Tillemont wrote, but also almost translated the very words and phrases of his predecessor. E.g., Gibbon wrote, "The bishops were obliged to check and to censure the forward zeal of the Christians, who voluntarily threw themselves into the hands of the magistrates. Some of these were persons oppressed by poverty and debts who blindly sought toterminate a miserable existence by a glorious death Others were allured by the hope that a short confinement would expiate the sins of a whole life; and others, again, were actuated by a less honourable motive of deriving a plentiful subsistence, and perhaps a considerable profit, from the alms which the charity of the faithful bestowed on the prisoners" (II, 145). Tillemont had written, "Mensurius s'y plaignoit encore de plusieurs autres qui s'exposoient trop hardiment à la persecution, les uns pour terminer promtement une vie qui leur estoit à charge, parcequ'ils estoient accablez de dettes envers le fisc . . . d'autres qui s'imaginoient purger & effacer (par une prison de quelque temps) les grands crimes dont ils se sentoient coupables, & d'autres enfin qui estoient bien aises d'estre en prison pour y estre bien traitez par la charité des autres Chrétiens, & y ammasser de l'argent" (Ibid., V, 28). Upon occasion, Gibbon supported a statement by citing Tillemont's testimony, but noted the difficulty which the subject under discussion caused the Catholic historian. E.g., in connection with his account of the kinds of early martyrs, Gibbon observed, "Tillemont is not pleased with so positive an exclusion of any former martyrs of the episcopal rank" (II, 109, note). Tillemont's words were, "C'est à dire que c'est le premier Evesque qui y ait repandu son sang pour J. C. Cependant il est bien difficile de croire que dans une aussi grande province qu'estoit l'Afrique, & où il y avoit tant d'Evesques, il n'y en eust encore jamais eu un seul de martyrizé" (Ibid., IV, 641). At times, it needs be acknowledged, Gibbon's interpretation of Tillemont's attitude seemed to partake of the character of conjecture. Thus he claimed, "The pious Tillemont rejects with a sigh the useful Acts of Artemus" (II, 324, note). But under the title, "Fautes dan les Actes d'Arteme," Tillemont had simply observed, "Ce qui y est raporté de l'histoire Romaine, est assez exact, quoiqu'il y ait des fautes, & est principalement conforme aux extraits qui nous restent de Philostorge. Pour ce qui regarde la personne d'Arteme, il est difficile de croire que ou Metaphraste ou quelque autre, n'ait pas ajouté beaucoup de choses à la verité . . . Baronius aussi les allegue souvent, & les veut faire passer pour sinceres & legitimes. Il est nean-moins oblige de reconnoistre qu'il y a des

choses à corriger" (Ibid., VII, 730, note). Occasionally, Gibbon parted company with his predecessor, completely, and cited him as representative of a mistaken view. E.g., "It is evident, notwithstanding the wishes of M. de Tillemont, that Tertullian composed his treatise De Carona long before he was engaged in the errors of the Montanists" (II, 20, note). Tillemont's words were, "Au contraire Tertullien y est plus severe (en beaucoup de points) comme sur celui de la guerre, (qu'il ne l'est mesme dans le livre de la Couronne, écrit dans son schisme)" (Ibid., III, 211, note). Similarly, Gibbon contended, "That difference, and a mistake, either of Eusebius or of his transcribers, have given occasion to suppose two Domitillas, the wife and the niece of Clemens" (II, 97, note). Actually, Tillemont had only recorded the testimony of an ancient writer, "Dion marque sur l'an 95 la mort du Consul Clement, l'exile de Domitille sa femme . . . . Un autre payen nommé Brutius marque l'exile de Ste. Domitille (vierge) niece du mesme Consul . . ." (Ibid., II, 118, note). On the strength of these instances, it may be asserted that while Gibbon freely departed from the interpretations of Tillemont, and upon occasion even challenged the facts which his predecessor reported, and while in certain instances, Gibbon's own interpretation of the earlier writer may be subject to question, there is no evidence that he ever failed to record fully and faithfully either the letter or the spirit of what Tillemont wrote.

Quite commonly Gibbon made a statement, and cited Mosheim as the source of his information. Thus he observed, "It was natural that the primitive tradition of a church which was founded only forty days after the death of Christ, and was governed almost as many years under the immediate inspection of his apostle, should be received as the standard of orthodoxy . . . the distant churches very frequently appealed to the authority of this venerable parent" (II, 9). Mosheim had written, "Hierosolymitanae quidem ecclesiae per tempus aliquod magna fuit dignitas et auctoritas quod ex Actis Apostolorum patet. Antiocheni controversiam suam de legis Mosaicae praestantia ecclesiae huius judicio subjiciebant, Actor XV. Idem alias fecisse ecclesias, verisimillimum est. Paulus divinitus licet ad obeundum Apostoli munus vocatus, id tamen in primis agebat, ut se, suamque disciplinam Apostolis et coetui Hierosolymitano probaret et commendaret. Gal. I:18, II, 7, 8. 9. Cf. J. L. Mosheim, De Rebus Christianorum Ante Constantium Magnum Comentarii, p. 153. Sometimes, Gibbon related the same external facts as Mosheim, but proceeded to advance his own theory of motivation. E.g., "The office of perpetual presidents in the councils of each province was conferred on the bishops of the principal city, and these aspiring prelates, who soon acquired the lofty titles of Metropolitans . . . secretly prepared to usurp over their episcopal brethren the same authority which the bishops had so lately assumed above . . . the presbyters" (II, 48). Mosheim had written, "Necesse enim quoniam erat, ut certa conciliorum sedes deligeretur, unique episcoporum foedere junctorum potestas concederetur, conventus indicandi et moderandi, suffragia colligendi, acta custodiendi, honos hic primariae in provincia urbi, eusque episcopo plerumque habebatur: ex quo progressu temporis dignitas et jus metropolitanorum, sic primariarum urbium episcopos nominabant, oriebatur" (Ibid., p. 269). At other

times, Gibbon supported an assertion by a reference to Mosheim, but also criticized his predecessor's treatment of the subject. E.g., for the statement, "The doctrine of Christ's reign upon earth was at first treated as a profound allegory, was considered by degrees as a doubtful and useless opinion, and was at length rejected . . ." Gibbon cited the authority of Dupin and Mosheim, but added, "the latter of these learned divines is not altogether candid on this occasion" (II, 26, note). Mosheim had written, "Inter has opiniones Judaicas, quibus philosophia detrimentum hac aetate attulit, celebrior est ceteris illa de Christo mille annos in his terris cum sanctis corpori suo restitutis regnaturo, inter ipsa fere rerum Christianarum initia in ecclesiam, ut puto, introducta. Eam ad ORIGENIS aetatem qui volebant, inter doctores libere profitebantur, et populo instillabant, alii licet eamdem vel negarent, vel in dubium vocarent. Verum ORIGENES eam, philosophiae quippe suae repugnantem, acriter oppugnabat, et quae patroni eius testabantur maxime, sacri codicis oracula illa, quam invenerat, divinos libros interpretandi arte aliorsum flectebat" (Ibid., p. 720). Occasionally, Gibbon referred to his predecessor's views only for the purpose of discounting them. E.g., in discussing the reaction to Middleton's Free Inquiry into the Miraculous Powers, Gibbon observed, "From the indignation of Mosheim, we may discover the sentiments of Lutheran divines" (II, 31, note). Mosheim's comment was, "Atqui ante aliquot tamen annos inter Britannos extitit vir aloquin ingenio excellenti, doctrinaque haud vulgari praeditus, CONYERS MIDDLETON, qui satis magno volumine emi so, universam gentem Christianam levitatis in hac re condemnavit, omniaque falsa pronuntiare ausus est, quae tot veterum ore ac calamo de extraordinariis Spiritus S. donis et primorum saeculorum, miraculis memoriae prodita sunt . . . . . Historiam celeberrimi huius libri acerrimaeque, quam peperit inter Britannos, disputationis petant, quibus placet, ex Britannorum, Gallorum et Germanorum diurnis eruditorum Actis, ex Germanica item libri ipsius conversione ac refutatione quae nuper lucem vidit" (Ibid., p. 221). But in every instance, even though a different use was made of the material and another emphasis struck, this inquiry indicates Gibbon's complete fidelity in transcribing not only the letter but the spirit of what Mosheim wrote.

Admittedly, the foregoing passages are selected only from Chapters Fifteen and Sixteen, together with the corresponding references in Tillemont and Mosheim. An exhaustive study would exceed the limits of this inquiry. But it may be hoped that they are reasonably representative.

15. Testimony by critics to Gibbon's accuracy.

The nineteenth century historian, Henry Milman, wrote: "The present Editor has followed the track of Gibbon through many parts of his work; he has read his authorities with constant references to his pages, and must pronounce his deliberate judgement in terms of the highest admiration of his general accuracy" (Milman, Preface, p. vii). He added, "Gibbon is rarely chargeable with the suppression of any material fact." This was the appraisal of a Protestant, but the Roman Catholic writer, Christopher Dawson (who could not be accused of excessive admiration for Gibbon), admitted: "Gibbon was the most conscientious historian; his critics never caught him out

in a single false reference or second hand quotation" (Edward Gibbon, p. 10). Again, the rationalist historian, J. B. Bury, observed: "Gibbon's diligent accuracy in the use of his materials cannot be over-praised" (I, ix). And the literary critic, Walter Bagehot, concurred: "The laborious research of German scholarship, a steady criticism of eighty years, have found few faults in detail. The account has been worked right, the proper authorities consulted, an accurate judgement formed" (Literary Studies, I, 228). Likewise, the Anglican writer, A. S. Farrar, asserted, "Those who in later times have re-examined Gibbon's statements admit that they can find hardly any errors of fact or intentional mis-statement of circumstance" (A Critical History of Free Thought, p. 277). And McCloy, who wrote a book on the premise that justice had not been done to Gibbon's critics, admitted that "their attempt to demonstrate Gibbon inaccurate . . . [had] wearied their readers with minute criticism . . ." (Gibbon's Antagonism to Christianity, p. 49).

16. Preference for the primary source.

In the Autobiography, Gibbon had written, "As it was my privilege to think with my own reason, so it was my duty to see with my own eyes" (Memoir E., p. 303). Again, "The labours of the moderns have served to guide, not to suspend, my inquiries" (Memoir D., p. 412). Against this, Dawson (Edward Gibbon, p. 10) contended that Gibbon went to the originals "to verify the references of his predecessors" and "to correct their judgements" rather than "to build up anew from the foundation." This is the kind of assertion which cannot be proven or disproved, but in the face of the historian's frequently reiterated concern to study the originals, and to use his predecessors only as a guide thereto, it does not merit the status of more than an opinion.

Gibbon was critical of the failure of other historians to cite the source of their information. Thus he wrote, "The total absence of quotations is the unpardonable blemish of his entertaining history" (II, 331, note). Again, he observed, "But he [Procopius might have informed us whether he had received this curious anecdote from common report or from the mouth of the royal physician" (IV, 217, note). Yet Gibbon found that it was not always feasible to provide specific authority for all of his own statements. In his discussion of theological history, he wrote: "If I persist in supporting each fact or reflection by its proper and special evidence, every line would demand a string of testimonies, and every note would swell to a critical dissertation" (V, 103, note). And in his consideration of ecclesiastical jurisdiction, he noted that "as the general propositions which I advance are the result of many particular and imperfect facts, I must either refer the reader to those modern authors who have expressly treated the subject or swell these notes to a disagreeable and disproportionate size" (II, 342, note).

17. Use of the secondary source.

Gibbon's occasional preference for the secondary source is illustrated by the following: "It is much better to read this part

of Augustan history in so learned and exact a compilation [Tillemont] than in the originals, which have neither method, accuracy, eloquence, or chronology" (Gibbon's Journal, p. 163).

The historian was completely free with his acknowledgements of instances in which he was entirely dependent upon the secondary source: "I do not pretend to make a personal acquaintance with Chrysostom" (III, 181, note). "I have verified and examined this passage, but I should never, without the aid of Tillemont . . . have detected an historical anecdote in a strange medley of moral and mystical exhortations" (III, 129, note). "I am indebted for these passages, though not for my inferences to the learned Dr. Lardner" (II, 63, note).

18. Gibbon's disposition towards scepticism.

An attitude of caution and wariness was constantly in evidence. More than once (II, 1, 146, 495), he referred to "the suspicious evidence of ecclesiastical history." And he cited "the ecclesiastical historians from whom alone we derive a partial and imperfect knowledge of this persecution" (Ibid., p. 127). Likewise, he announced his intention "to distrust accounts of foreign and remote nations, and to suspend our belief of every tale that deviates from the law of nature" (VII, 100, note). Against this latter intention, Collingwood's comment (The Idea of History, p. 239) may be applied: "The historian's experience of the world in which he lives can only help him to check . . . the statements of his authorities in so far as they are concerned not with history but with nature . . . . The laws of nature have always been the same . . . but the historical as distinct from the natural conditions of man's life differ so much at different times that no argument from analogy will hold. That the Greeks and Romans exposed their newborn children in order to control the numbers of their population is no less true for being unlike anything . . .[today] ." Gibbon did concur at least with the critic's illustration, as he wrote of the "great numbers of infants who, according to the inhuman practice of the times, had been exposed by their parents . . ." (II, 54). But more often Gibbon's scepticism took the form of agnosticism in which he expressed uncertainty rather than outright rejection of the account of a writer. Thus he wrote, "I must repeat though I cannot credit, the evidence of Phranza . . ." (VII, 190). About another writer, he remarked, "His opinion can never be trusted unless our assent is extorted by the internal evidence of facts" (V, 115, note). And for the character of Mohamet, he observed, "It is dangerous to trust either Turks or Christians" (VII, 166, note). A similar attitude is reflected in his account of the sufferings of the early martyrs: "but I cannot determine what I ought to transcribe until I am satisfied how much I ought to believe" (II, 144). The best basis for procedure was to keep constantly in mind the nature of a predecessor's bias; thus Gibbon carefully noted the fact of it in each of his predecessors: "Eusebius . . . indirectly confesses that he has related whatever might redound to the glory, and that he has suppressed all that could tend to the disgrace, of religion" (II, 144). Of Tillemont's Life of Augustine, he wrote, "The diligence of that learned Jansenist was excited by devout zeal for the

founder of his sect" (III, 430). Of Mosheim, he observed, "This historian has been carefully strained through an orthodox sieve" (III, 155, note). And his general estimate is reflected in the comment on "the precarious assistance of the ecclesiastical writers, who, in the heat of religious faction, are apt to despise the profane virtues of sincerity and moderation" (III, 128). An interesting testimony to the basis for such scepticism has been provided by a contemporary Christian historian: "During two thousand years, the ecclesiastical mind in general has tended to be particularly unfortunate in its handling of historical data; for it has cherished more legends than anybody else, and has attempted to maintain them by force when all argument in their favour has lost its efficacy" (H. Butterfield, Christianity, Diplomacy and War, p. 18).

Gibbon not only identified the prejudice of his predecessors but was ever watchful for instances of its operation. Thus he contended, "Most of the moderns except Dodwell have seized the occasion [created by the ambiguity of the early fathers regarding the hostile intentions of the emperor Aurelian] of gaining a few extraordinary martyrs" (II, 122, note). And he never failed to note when the bias of a predecessor was embarrassed by the nature of the documents with which he was dealing. Thus with reference to certain writings of Irenaeus and Tertullian, Gibbon observed, "LeClerc and Mosheim labour in the interpretation of these passages, but the loose and rhetorical style of the fathers often appears favourable to the pretensions of Rome" (II, 49, note). Again, "Petavius . . . has collected many similar passages on the virtues of the cross which in the last age embarrassed our Protestant disputants" (Ibid., p. 320, note).

19. Limits to the scepticism.

After full acknowledgement has been made of the extent of Gibbon's scepticism, it is still evident that in many instances Gibbon proceeded to place great faith in the accounts of these same predecessors. E.g., "We can more safely rely on the learned Eusebius than on the vehement Tertullian or the credulous Epiphanius" (II, 11, note). He referred to Tillemont as "that incomparable guide whose bigotry is overbalanced by the merits of erudition, and whose inimitable accuracy assumes almost the character of genius" (V, 141, note). And he described Mosheim as "learned and impartial" and termed the latter's De Rebus Christianae, "a masterly performance, which I shall often have occasion to quote" (II, 9, note).

20. Mistaken impression of vacillation.

To reason from the fact that there were instances in which Gibbon was 'uncritical' to the conclusion that he possessed no critical apparatus is not justified. J. B. Bury had the status of a critical historian by the most rigid nineteenth century standards; yet "when he wrote on the nineteenth century papacy, he made howlers which would prevent an undergraduate from gaining the bottom class in a university examination on the subject" (Butterfield, History and Human Relations, p. 156). It would appear that the papacy was a dangerous subject even for the most 'scientific' of historians.

Thus Croce cited the 'contradictions' of Ranke's History of the Popes, claiming that "The Jesuit . . . will always prevail from the point of view of vigourous criticism . . . . Either the Papacy is always and everywhere what it affirms to be, an institution of the Son of God made man, or it is a lie" (History of Historiography, pp. 300, 310). At least Gibbon would have experienced no difficulty with the latter supposition.

21. Methods of evaluating 'authorities'.

Gibbon was quick to acknowledge when a predecessor had made the conscensus: e.g., "LeClerc seems to have collected from Eusebius, Jerome, Epiphanius, and other writers, all the principal circumstances that relate to the Nazarenes or Ebionites" (II, 11, note). Again, "Mosheim, from many scattered passages of Lactantius and Eusebius, has collected a very just and accurate notion of this edict of Diocletian against the Christians " (II, 130, note).

He clearly recognized that the repetition of an account by many writers added nothing to its authority. E.g., "A rumour is mentioned by Tacitus with very becoming distrust and hesitancy, whilst it is greedily transcribed by Suetonius and solemnly confirmed by Dion" (II, 90, note). For Gibbon's description of the successive improvements of a story about Pontius Pilate, see II, 116, note; and for further instances of the tracing of 'fictions', see II, 128, note; 120, note; 135, note. In the face of the number of instances which can be cited, it is difficult to believe that Bury actually supposed that the following comment applied to Gibbon even though he included it in an analysis of advances since Gibbon's time: "The untrained historian fails to recognize that nothing is added to the value of a statement of Widukind by its repetition by Thietmar . . . and that a record . . . of Theophanes gains no further credibility from the fact that it likewise occurs in Cedrenus" (I, xi).

Variations between authorities were conscientiously noted. E.g., "The eloquent Lactantius seems impatient to proclaim to the world the glorious example of the sovereign of Gaul who, in the first moments of his reign, acknowledged . . . the majesty of the true . . . God. The learned Eusebius has ascribed the faith of Constantine to the miraculous sign which was displayed in the heavens . . . . The historian Zosimus . . . asserts that the emperor had imbrued his hands in the blood of his eldest son before he publicly renounced the gods of Rome" (II, 306). For further instances of discrepancies between Lactantius and Eusebius, see II, 143, note; between Sozomen and Socrates, see III, 408, note; for a comparison between Mosheim, LeClerc and Beausobre, see II, 15, note.

Some of Gibbon's excursions into textual criticism appear now to have been so much 'beating of the air'. Thus he questioned the validity of a passage concerning Jesus Christ which, he contended, was inserted into the text of Josephus between the time of Origin and that of Eusebius, and which he described as an example "of no vulgar forgery" (II, 92, note). But Bury has pointed out that the interpolated passage does not appear in the best manuscript. In certain instances, there has been at least partial vindication of Gibbon's conclusion. Thus he noted, "In the present text

of Ammianus, we read 'Asper quidem sed ad lenitatem propensior' which forms a sentence of contradictory nonsense. With the aid of an old manuscript Valesius has rectified the first of these corruptions, and we perceive a ray of light in the substitution of the word 'vafer'" (II, 266, note). Bury's comment was "The best MS has 'afen', whence Kiessling has restored 'Afer', which Gardhausen accepts" (Ibid.). In still other instances, Gibbon was more right than he knew. E.g., he had cited the statement of Eusebius regarding the erection in Rome of a statue of Constantine holding a cross (II, 318, note). Bury observed, "Brieger thought that in this case the passage in H.E. is an interpolation from that in the Vit. C. But Schultze . . . has shown that Eusebius mentioned the statue in question in his speech at Tyre in 314 A.D., from H.E. x.4, 16 (II, Appendis, 595). For another instance of such subsequent confirmation, cf. I, Appendix 1, 484.

Alterations introduced by translators were also noted. E.g., "The Latin translator [of Eusebius] has thought proper to reduce the number of presbyters to forty-four" (II, 65, note). "His [Eusebius'] Latin translator adds the important circumstance of the permission given to the inhabitants of retiring from thence" (II, 135, note). Cf. also II, 128, note; and II, 26, note.

On the operation of the 'historical sense', Collingwood (The Idea of History, p. 244) wrote, "Whether he [the historian] accepts or rejects or modifies or reinterprets what his so-called authorities tell him, it is he that is responsible for the statement which, after duly criticizing them, he makes." And it has also been argued that "the picture of the historian's subject, though it may consist in part of statements drawn directly from his authorities, consists also, and increasingly with every increase in his competence as an historian, in statements reached inferentially from these, according to his own criteria, his own rules of method" (Philosophy and History, p. 333).

22. The verdict of critics on Gibbon's 'critical' accomplishment.

Croce (History as the Story of Liberty, p. 70) wrote, "We must not mistake erudition and the criticism of evidence for historicism [by which he meant scientific history]. In order to understand the true spirit of that century [the eighteenth] , it is essential to understand that unscientific history and erudition not only lived peaceably side by side, but that the erudites, when they tried to think, did so according to the ideas of the time, that is, unhistorically."

In his survey of the development of historiography, Collingwood significantly placed Gibbon in the section before his chapter on "The Threshold of Scientific History" (The Idea of History, p. 87). He also expressed amazement that Bury, by editing The Decline and Fall, should seek to bring Gibbon up to date "by means of footnotes . . . without suspecting that the very discovery of these facts resulted from an historical mentality so different from Gibbon's own that the result was not unlike adding a saxophone obligato to an Elizabethan madrigal" (Ibid., p. 147).

Bury (Selected Essays, p. 5) wrote, "The proposition that before the beginning of the last [the nineteenth] century, the study

of history was not scientific may be sustained in spite of a few exceptions." Gibbon was not cited among the exceptions. Bury added, "A few stand on a higher level in so far as they were really alive to the need of bringing reason and critical doubt to bear on the material, but the systematized method which distinguishes a science was beyond the reach of all, except a few like Mabillon. Erudition has now been supplemented by scientific method, and we owe the change to Germany" (Ibid., p. 5).

23. The impossibility of 'objectivity'.

Butterfield (Christianity and History, p. 9) has argued that to the extent technical history is not content with the presentation of mere abstract facts and seeks to introduce an interpretation of the meaning of what has occurred, it is guided by that "which we bring to our history and superimpose upon it . . . . We cannot say that we obtained it as technical historians by inescapable inferences from the purely historical evidence" (p. 23). Cf. also Philosophy and History, p. 332 ff. It is now being widely recognized that the concepts of science itself necessarily partake of the character of interpretations. These interpretations, while they assist to piece together into a more meaningful pattern the scattered materials of one's experience, cannot pretend to be more than constructs of the human mind which may in time be replaced by other interpretations capable of making even better sense of the total mesh of life's experience. Cf. Christianity in an Age of Science, p. 16 ff. Cf. also Philosophy and History, p. 158, for a statement of the historically determined character of all claims to 'timeless validity'.

24. A justifiable connotation of 'scientific'.

A critic has observed, "These limitations [inflicted by the age in which one lives] are often taken for deficiencies as though a more powerful thinker than Plato would have lifted himself clean out of the atmosphere of Greek politics, or as if Aristotle ought to have anticipated the moral conceptions of Christianity. So far from being a defect, they are a sign of merit . . . they are most clearly seen in those works whose quality is the best. The reason is that the authors are doing best the only thing that can be done, expanding the position reached by the human mind in its historical development down to their own time" (Collingwood, op. cit., p. 229). And Butterfield (History and Human Relations, p. 170) concurred, "The best thing that any of us can do at a given moment only represents the present state of knowledge in respect of the subject with which we are dealing."

It has been argued that history has to be rewritten by a single historian who "finds when he tries to reopen an old question that the question itself has changed. The historian can see it [the historic process] only from the point of view which at the present moment he occupies within it" (Collingwood, op. cit., p. 248). Croce went even further to insist that "every thinking of history is always adequate to the moment at which it appears, and always inadequate to the moment that follows" (History of Historiography, p. 201). One feels that this is an extreme statement employed for purposes of illustration; literally, it would mean that every

history was 'inadequate', including Croce's history of historiography.

25. The implications of the 'subjective'.

A justification of the legitimacy of divergences between historians has been well stated by a contemporary writer thus: "A given event may be treated by one historian as of the greatest importance, and by another as quite incidental for the knowledge of a certain group of facts: each of the two historians is facing it with the experience of his own personality, i.e., as an Italian or an Englishman, as a nobleman or a commoner; he cannot understand it except in relation to what gives concreteness to his life. The two historians are different from each other . . . when they introduce their personality in order to understand historical fact, they are introducing something different; and that is why the pictures which they achieve by means of their honest efforts after the truth of history turn out differently. It may be the case that both historians are right, the one finding the fact in question relevant to his picture of history, the other finding it indifferent to his . . . . Neither of them can exhaust historical reality just because each sees it from his own standpoint . . ." (Philosophy and History, p. 148).

The advance since Gibbon's day has been an advance in the understanding of the limits of an historical inquiry. It is true that Gibbon had some presentiment of this when he insisted on designating his study, an inquiry into 'secondary causes'. Yet it would be difficult for him or any other eighteenth century writer to understand what the contemporary critic meant in contending: "Critical philosophy will forbid all talk of the givenness of meaning in events or in history, and will emphasize that wherever there is an attempt to determine the guiding force of historical evolution, totally alogical assumptions are necessarily implied" (Philosophy and History, p. 334). What was called for from Gibbon was not the elimination of the subjective element but only the acknowledgement of it.

26. The basis for an evaluation of an interpretation.

It has been argued that "because our view of the significance of historical facts varies according to the perspective from which we look at them, it does not follow that all perspectives are equally false. That perspective from which we see most clearly all the facts, without having to explain any of them away, will be a relatively true perspective" (Alan Richardson, Christian Apologetics, p. 105). And Reinhold Niebuhr (Faith and History, p. 172) applied the same criterion to evaluate the truth of the Gospel: "It [the Gospel] is validated when the truth of faith is correlated with all truths which may be known by scientific and philosophical disciplines, and proves itself a resource for co-ordinating them into a deeper and wider system of coherence." An entirely different criterion has been suggested by a modern writer who argued that standpoints may be evaluated for their 'objectivity' by the extent

to which they aspire to the highest standards of 'humanity' which a particular age has been able to achieve. Wrote this critic: "It may be said generally that an historical perspective will be more free and open for the understanding of every height and depth of man in proportion as it realizes contemporary humanity in itself with more purity and strength" (Philosophy and History, p. 156).

27. Gibbon's desire for detachment.

One feels that the historian took particular pleasure in viewing the quarrels of mortals from the remoteness of philosophic detachment. Thus in characteristic vein, he wrote, "Omnipotence itself cannot escape the murmur of its discordant votaries since the same dispensation which was regarded as a deliverance in Europe was deplored as a calamity in Asia" (VI, 369). And in presenting the impact of Constantine upon subsequent ages, he observed, "By the grateful zeal of the Christians, the deliverer of the Church had been decorated with every attribute of a hero . . . while the vanquished party has compared Constantine to the most abhorred of those tyrants who by their vice and weakness dishonoured the Imperial purple" (II, 214). The same aloofness was reflected by the following: "I cannot discover how Protestants can be affected if Irenaeus in the second century or Palavicini in the seventeenth were tempted . . . to countenance the system of ecclesiastical dominion . . . pursued in every age by the aspiring bishops of Rome" Misc. Works, p. 740).

Recognition of the fact of the detachment has been made by critics of diverse schools. Thus Bury sought to explain Gibbon's 'antagonism' by claiming that it was "the fashion of the age" rather than anything peculiar to the man himself, and by asserting that if Gibbon were writing today, "he would assume an attitude of detachment from all forms of sentiment about early Christianity." Cf. I, (1896) p. xxxix. And Algernon Cecil (Six Oxford Thinkers, p. 37) observed, "The purity, the enthusiasm, the calm serenity of the Primitive Church passed before his eyes. He treated them with the same cold and critical indifference as he meted out to the vices of Elagabalus."

28. Absence of evidence of an emotional involvement.

That Gibbon was primarily an intellectual and not a man of emotion is clearly established. But that fact does not justify the contention that "the roots of the spiritual life did not exist for him. It never withered because it never shot up. He had no profound associations to interest his heart." This was cited by Robertson, Gibbon, p. 8. The historian's warm attachment to his friends and his devotion to his calling as an historian testified to the existence of a 'spiritual life' even though it did not follow the pattern of traditional religion. And the very fact that he wrote the History witnessed to the interior quality of the man. As Cassirer wrote, "What grips us in any great historical achievement is not the report of what has happened in the past, nor is it the rendering of something merely factual; rather we feel in it . . . something which cannot result from anything but a peculiar

spiritually personal center of life" (Philosophy and History, p. 142).

29. Recognition of the merits of individual Christians.

The historian observed, "Whatever opinion we may entertain of the character or principles of Thomas Becket, we must acknowledge that he suffered death with a constancy not unworthy of the primitive martyrs" (II, 110, note). And he expressed an equally positive attitude towards William Law, whom one might suspect would provide as sharp an antithesis to Gibbon's approach to religion as any person possible could: "In our family, he [Law] left a reputation of a worthy and pious man who believed all he professed and practised all he enjoined" (Memoir A., p. 388). Upon occasion, the same appreciative attitude was indicated towards Christians, collectively: "The Christians could allege, with truth and confidence, that they held the principle of passive obedience, and that, in the space of three centuries, their conduct had always been conformable to their principles. They might add that the throne of the Emperors would be established on a fixed . . . basis, if all . . . learned to suffer and obey" (II, 314). It is hardly surprising that the critic who complained that Gibbon dwelt on the degenerate periods of Christianity and passed quickly over its brighter chapters was forced to account for these 'exceptional' instances by intimating that "there are occasions when its [Christianity's] exalted humanity can compel even him to fairness" (Milman, op. cit., p. vi). And he added, "He [Gibbon] reluctantly admits their claim to admiration." Comment upon such uncharitable and unprovable detractions scarcely seems warranted.

30. The constructive role of the Church.

Gibbon observed that if the Church was "always the enemy of reason," it was "often the parent of taste" (Memoir B., p. 199). And he contended that "the growing authority of the Popes cemented the union of the Christian republic; and gradually produced the similar manners and common jurisprudence, which have distinguished, from the rest of mankind, the independent, and even hostile, nations of modern Europe" (IV, 87).

Rationalists have commonly contended that Christianity was the enemy of reason and the sciences. Thus in a chapter entitled "Reason in Prison," J. B. Bury (A History of Freedom of Thought, p. 46) argued, "There were . . . doctrines and implications in Christianity which, forming a solid rampart against the advance of knowledge, blocked the paths of science in the Middle Ages, and obstructed its progress til the latter part of the nineteenth century." And J. M. Robertson concurred, "The subsequent intellectual newbirth of European semi-barbarism was effected not through but in the teeth of organized Christianity, by the fresh assimilation of ancient pagan lore and sciences, and later through the new diffusion of ancient learning resulting from the downfall of Christian Constantinople" (Gibbon on Christianity, p. xvi). But this view has been resoundingly challenged in recent years. For the argument that Christianity was the chief contributing factor in the rise of modern science by liberating man "from the power of baser elemental nature and demons," cf. Nicolas Berdyaev, The Meaning of History, p. 113, ff. Cf. also Herbert Butterfield, The Origins of Modern

Science, p. 51, ff.

In one instance, Gibbon's readiness to admit evidence regardless of what conclusion it might prompt, got him into difficulty. For despite his deep conviction that miracles were untenable in any scientific view of the historic process, he encountered what he considered remarkably good evidence for the 'miracle' of the tongueless confessions (IV, 98). It remained for Leslie Stephen (English Thought, II, 267) to point out that people in modern times have been known to speak without tongues.

It may not be without interest that in 1806, An Historical View of Christianity was published (London: Cadel& Davies) which contained select passages of scriptures, "with a commentary by the late Edward Gibbon, Esquire." This commentary consisted of selections from The Decline and Fall which, the Editor claimed, supported the argument for Christianity's historicity. In the Preface, the Editor (who remained anonymous) commented, "It must be gratifying to those who interest themselves in the character of our historian, to behold him producing the most unequivocal and unexceptionable evidence in support of Revelation." While the reader may be amused at the seeming brashness of such an attempt and note that the passages had to be selected with extreme care, the fact remains that one can find in the History ample material which submits to an interpretation not uncongenial to Christianity.

31. The charge of unfairness levelled by critics.

"Gibbon suppresses all which adds to the glory of the Christian Church and suggests or raises all which tends to weaken it" (M. Guillon, Examen Critique des Doctrines du Gibbon). This reference was cited by McCloy, op. cit., p. 280. Such a comment can be discounted for its Catholic animus, but an objective critic like J. B. Black (The Art of History, p. 170) asserted, "His entire history is saturated with this temperamental and intellectual antipathy," and contended that Milman's was a very moderate indictment: "Christianity alone receives no embellishment in Gibbon. His imagination is dead to its moral dignity.

32. The manner of presentation.

Many of Gibbon's views on the martyrs and the persecutions have been substantiated by later Christian scholars. Thus writing of the early period of ecclesiastical history, the Christian historian, Williston Walker, confessed, "Yet the number of actual martyrs in this period appears to have been relatively small compared with those of the third and fourth centuries. No general persecution occurred before 250" (A History of the Christian Church, p. 49). But with reference to the third and fourth centuries, the same historian contended that other than in brief periods when persecution assumed "great ferocity," the Christians enjoyed "a considerable degree of toleration." See Ibid., p. 84 ff, p. 109 ff. Of interest also is the comment of the Christian writer, Stephen Neill (The Christian Society, p. 38): "The Church would not have found it necessary to order that none should be accounted as martyrs who had deliberately courted martyrdom, unless there had been a tendency for some unnecessarily to seek the martyr's crown; and such a

running upon suffering is always evidence of a certain pathological instability." Cf. II, 112.

"Who can refute a sneer?" asked W. Paley. (The Principles of Moral and Political Philosophy, II, ix.) "You have endeavoured to effectuate your purposes by indirect machinations," cried Travis. (G. Travis, Letters to Edward Gibbon, Esq., p. 351.) "He ridicules in sense what he asserts in words," complained David Dalrymple. (An Inquiry into the Secondary Causes, p. vi.) And in a letter to Gibbon, Priestley wrote, "For what can reflect greater dishonour on a man than to say one thing and to mean another?" (Misc. Works, p. 311.) The defender, R. Porson, added, "I see nothing wrong in Mr. Gibbon's attack on Christianity. We can only blame him for carrying on the attack in an insidious manner and with improper weapons" (Letters to Mr. Archdeacon Travis, p. xxv).

33. Irony not applied only against Christians.

Examples of the application of Gibbon's irony to non-Christian religions are plentiful. Thus of the Jews, he wrote, "They embraced every opportunity of over-reaching the idolaters in trade" (II, 79). Again, "When the posterity of Abraham had multiplied like the sands of the sea, the Deity, from whose mouth they received a system of law and ceremonies, declared himself . . . the proper God of Israel" (II, 5). See also II, 3, note 3; and page 4, note 11.

About another faith, he noted, "Mohamet has not specified the male companions of female elect, lest he should disturb the felicity of their former husbands by the suspicion of an everlasting marriage" (V, 454). Again, "If we remember the seven hundred wives and three hundred concubines of Solomon, we shall applaud the modesty of the Arabian who espoused no more than seventeen or fifteen wives" (V, 403).

34. Application of irony to Christianity.

The classical quality of the historian's irony is illustrated by the following sentences which, from a literary standpoint, would be difficult to surpass: "The revolutions of seventeen centuries has instructed us not to press too closely the language of prophecy and revelation; but as long as for wise purposes this error [the belief in the imminent end of the world] was permitted to subsist in the Church, it was productive of the most salutary effects" (II, 25). "We cannot entirely remove the imputation of ignorance which has been so arrogantly cast upon the first proselytes," but we must "convert the occasion of scandal into a subject of edification," and remember that "the lower we depress the temporal condition of the first Christians, the more reason we shall find to admire their merit and success" (II, 72). "There are some objections to the authority of Moses and the Prophets which too readily present themselves to the sceptical mind, though they can only be derived from our ignorance of remote antiquity and our incapacity to form an adequate judgement of the divine economy" (II, 12).

Occasionally the note of derision was very evident: "Their [the Crusaders'] genuine leaders were a goose and a goat, to whom were ascribed an infusion of the Holy Spirit" (VI, 285). In a note, he referred to an "orthodox protester," a hound who barked furiously

during the signing of a treaty of union between the eastern and western Churches (VII, 117). Of Cyril of Alexandria, he observed, "The title of saint is a mark that his opinions and his party have finally prevailed" (V, 114). The same derision was reflected in the reference to "the Logos . . . Taught in the schools of Alexandria, 300 B.C. . . . Revealed to the Apostle, St. John, 97 A.D." (II, 356, 358). This jibe aroused Collingwood's ire: "Most people know . . . that the notion of the logos was a commonplace familiar to every Platonist, but that the Johannine doctrine according to which the logos was made flesh was a new idea peculiar to Christianity" (Metaphysics, p. 220).

But Gibbon more commonly relied on the subtle thrust of 'innocent' suggestion: "It is remarkable that Bernard who records so many miracles of his friend never takes any notice of his own" (II, 32). Shall we ascribe this [freedom from controversy] to the simplicity of their faith and courage or to our less intimate knowledge of their history?" (Ibid., p. 114). Chapter Twenty-eight was entitled significantly, "Final Destruction of Paganism — Introduction of the Worship of Saints and Relics among the Christians." Nor did Gibbon ever tire of conveying a meaning by expressing the opposite sentiment: "It may be hoped that none except the heretics gave occasion to the complaint of Celsus that the Christians were perpetually correcting and altering their gospels" (II, 71). "Nor shall I believe that the most ardent in slaughter and rapine were the foremost in the procession to the Holy Sepulchre" (VI, 334). "Nor can we hastily believe that the servants of the Prince of Peace would unsheath the sword of destruction unless their motives were pure" (VI, 276).

The Christian reaction to this treatment of Church history might have been predicted, but the response in Scotland differed notably from the opposition in England. Letters of eulogy from outstanding Scots are contained in the Misc. Works; e.g., from Dr. Robertson (p. 273); from Dr. George Campbell of Aberdeen (p. 277) who expressed delight in finding in Chapters Fifteen and Sixteen "so great a coincidence with my own sentiments"; and from a Mr. Wallace of Edinburgh (p. 278), who called the History "incomparably the finest production in English without any exception." Scotland's recognition of the greatness of Gibbon was marred only by a poem of caricature written by George Colman (Eccentricities for Edinburgh). Sample line: (p. 86) "She bowed as near the drooping lover drew. 'She'll let me in,' he groaned; 'and should she frown, love's bliss is lost — but oh — what rapture to sit down'." It would appear that far more freedom of thought and a far greater conception of tolerance prevailed during this period in Scotland than in England.

35. The reason for the use of irony.

Bury contended that "three years imprisonment without bail was, for the second offense, the penalty imposed on any who, brought up as a Christian, should deny the truth of Christianity . . . irony was the historian's defensive armour against these barbarous laws" (Autobiography, p. xv). Birkbeck Hill concurred, "If at times he veiled his scepticism with the affectation of belief, part of the blame must be bourne by the law of the land" (Gibbon's Memoirs, edited by B. Hill, p. xv.) But Gibbon had specifically written, "I could

only rejoice that if the voices of our priests was clamorous and bitter, their hands were disarmed of the powers of persecution" (Memoir E., p. 316). And Jane Norton concurred: "He lived in a country where a man may speak and write as he thinks" (The Bibliography of the Works of Edward Gibbon, p. 84).

Thus in contrasting his circumstances with those of Servetus, Gibbon wrote, "I must applaud the felicity of this country, and of this age, which has disarmed if it could not mollify the fierceness of ecclesiastical criticism" (Misc. Works, p. 724). And he had also written, "Nor can I reflect without pleasure on the bounty of Nature, which cast my birth in a free and civilized country, in an age of science and philosophy" (Memoir B., p. 105).

36. The presence of bias.

The ecclesiastical historian, H. M. Gwatkin (Early Church History to A.D. 313, I, 186) argued that "against Christianity in general the charge of immoralities was never much more than a vulgar slander. Yet they had a colour of truth, for some of the Gnostics were immoral," and "were said to have recognized each other by a mark behind the ear." Were it necessary to choose between such credibility and a full-fledged scepticism, preference must be allotted to the latter.

37. The one lasting enthusiasm of his life.

In the Autobiography (p. 32), Gibbon described the excitement with which he first came across Echard's Roman History: "To me, the reign of the successors of Constantine was absolutely new; and I was immersed in the passage of the Goths over the Danube when the summons of the dinner bell reluctantly dragged me from my intellectual feast." "At the distance of twenty five years, I can neither forget nor express the strong emotion which agitated my mind when I first approached and entered the eternal city" (Autobiography, p. 158). Of this experience, Butterfield (The Whig Interpretation, p. 96) wrote that "the true historical fervour is the love of the past for the sake of the past. It was the fervour that was awakened in Gibbon at the sight of the ruins of ancient Rome." Nor was this experience of a passing nature. Any reading of his writings must convey the sense of a deep and direct impression which Rome had made first upon the youth and then upon the man.

Yet a critic has argued, "Die Sentimentalität [which Gibbon expressed over the fall of the Empire] war auch nur die Trauer über den Untergang von Aufklärungswerten " (Meinecke, op. cit., p. 254). And Collingwood (The Idea of History, p. xii) contended that "Gibbon looks at Roman history "merely from the viewpoint of an "eighteenth century Englishman." But the critic acknowledged(p. 79) that unlike other eighteenth century Englishmen, Gibbon saw history as embodying retrogression from a golden age in the Roman era rather than as progress towards some future goal. Similarly, H. J. Blackham (The Human Tradition, p. 11) termed Toynbee's admiration for the Greeks and the Romans "a beautifully eighteenth-century idea, . . . which makes him contemporary with Gibbon." But according to the critic's own admission (p. 11), this was not the attitude of Hume, and it was not

Voltaire's view. Admittedly Rousseau affirmed a theory of regress with his conception of the virtuous primitive society which was undermined by kings and priests, but Rousseau was not a classicist. One wonders about the basis, other than in Gibbon, for this 'beautifully eighteenth-century idea'.

Gibbon's first attempt at writing was entitled "The Age of Sesostris," in which he sought "to investigate the probable date of the life and reign of the conqueror of Asia" (Autobiography, p. 43). His first published work, the Essai Sur l'étude de la Litterature, was a defence of classical studies as being of relevance to the modern world. Significantly, his only other work published before the History, Critical Observations on the Sixth Book of the Aeneid, belonged to the same classical period. And his unpublished works contained a large number of monographs on subjects related to antiquity.

Glowingly, he wrote, "It [the Empire] comprehended the fairest part of the earth and the most civilized portion of mankind . . . . The gentle but powerful influence of law and manners had gradually cemented the union of the provinces. Their peaceful inhabitants enjoyed and abused the advantages of wealth and luxury . . . if a man were called to fix the period in which the human race was most happy and most prosperous, he would without hesitation name that which elapsed from the death of Domitian to the accession of Commodus" (I, 1, 86). And of the Antonine emperors, he observed, "They enjoyed without a division the inimitable concord of virtue and friendship, the unsuspecting confidence of authority and obedience" (Among the Gibbon Papers, VII, 293).

Critics have complained of the 'contradiction' between Gibbon's admiration for the order of the Empire and his recognition of the evils of imperialism. Thus Meinecke (op. cit., p. 250) argued, "Aber hat er ihn, hat er die von ihm angenommene Tatsache, dass hochstes Menschenglück in einer schon dem Untergange geweihten Kultur sich entfaltet hat, wirklich ganz tief und rein tragisch empfunden?" But Gibbon would have argued that absolutism was not inherently self-destructive. Political despotism did not, in his judgement, necessarily involve imperialism. Thus he could appreciate the advantages of an enlightened despotism while repudiating the inevitable evils of imperialism. And that he recognized the danger is reflected by the observation that "the happiness of an hundred millions depended on the personal merit of one or two men . . . " (IV, 177).

38. Errors resulting from the attitude of partiality.

The historian freely confessed his favourable disposition towards Rome. Thus he wrote, "As often as I use the definition 'beyond the Alps' 'the Rhine', 'the Danube', I suppose myself at Rome" (I, xvii). But sometimes the preference was not as defensible. E.g., he hastened rapidly over Arnold of Brescia while dwelling on Rienzi, "the constructive theories of the greater of the tribunes" being "of little significance compared with the pageant of revived antiquity of which Rienzi was the central figure" (Thompson, op. cit., p. 16). Likewise, his assumption that the Latin was the only tradition worthy of note, and that nothing outside of it deserved the name of civilization, led him to a disparagement of the eastern empire, whose history he referred to as "a tedious and uniform tale of weakness and

misery" (V, 180). This verdict has been hit upon by critics (following Bury, I [1896] xvi) as one of the most unjustifiable judgements ever rendered by a "thoughtful" historian.

Gibbon argued that confusion might have resulted from two possible meanings of the term 'Galilaean' in the testimony of Tacitus. It might refer to the Christians or to a small group of Jewish nationalists. "How natural it was for Tacitus in the time of Hadrian to appropriate to the Christians the guilt and the suffering which he might with far greater truth assign to a sect almost extinguished" (II, 95). Bury commented, "Gibbon's conjecture is not happy and need not be seriously considered," and Guizot also annihilated Gibbon's argument (Guizot's Edition, I, 215, note). But Gibbon described his argument as "no more than a conjecture." Guizot (Ibid., p. 179, note) also argued against Gibbon over the universal toleration which the latter had claimed for the era. The critic cited the advice of Mecaenas to Augustus, "Honour yourself the gods with care according to the wishes of our fathers, and compel others to honour them." Bury cited Gibbon's failure to indicate that it was an age of religious revival; (I, 61, note) and Collingwood (Metaphysics, p. 74) claimed that he missed the "internal strains" and tensions of the times: "He begins by depicting the Antonine period as a golden age, that is, an age containing no internal strains whatever, and from this non-historical or anti-historical tenor of its opening, the narrative never quite recovers."

39. The confirmation of critics.

After pointing out that the emperors in this era threw off the cloak of humility, and despotism became established in principle as well as fact as the government of Rome, James Bryce (Holy Roman Empire, p. 5) described the period thus: "Few troops were quartered through the country . . . few fortresses . . . . The distant crash of war from the Rhine or the Euphrates was scarcely heard or heeded in the profound quiet . . . . No quarrels of race or religion disturbed that calm." And Arnold Toynbee concurred: "The picture of the Graeco-Roman world during the second century after Christ witnessed a change for the better from the same world two hundred years earlier. Before it had been wracked by revolution, seething with tumult and violence. But in the second century after Christ, we find peace . . ." (The World and the West, p. 91). And Herbert Butterfield (Christianity in European History, p. 7) reached a similar conclusion: "Shortly before the time of Christ there had opened in the civilized world around the Mediterranean Sea a period of peace which . . . was to last for two centuries — a phenomenon which would be difficult to parallel."

40. Gibbon's obliviousness to his own era.

"I entered Parliament without patriotism and without ambition" (Misc. Works, p. 314). Throughout the correspondence, the impression is that political connections were important to Gibbon for what personal emolument they might bring. And he wanted his political activities not to interfere with his historical studies. Thus he confessed his happiness with the "unbroken vacation of the Board of Trade" which "made it possible to enjoy weeks of repose in my

library" (Misc. Works, p. 300). Gibbon's most positive statement about Parliament concerned its contribution to his training as an historian: "The eight sessions I sat in Parliament were a school of civil prudence, the first and most essential virtue of an historian" (Autobiography, p. 179).

So astute a student of history might have foreseen the consequences of the policy of Lord North. Gibbon later did condemn him: "I repeat that in my opinion Lord North does not deserve pardon for the past, applause for the present, or confidence for the future" (Autobiography, p. xii). Yet he recounted that he supported "with many a sincere and silent vote the rights, though not perhaps the interests, of the mother country" (Memoir E., p. 310). Thus he endorsed a policy which was certain to lose his country its most important colonial possession. Almost to the end of the conflict, he was without insight as to the outcome. See Misc. Works, p. 267, 271. As R. B. Mowat (Gibbon, p. 177)observed, "The decline and fall of the first British Empire in America had begun, but he only discerned the decline and fall of the ancient Roman Empire." But Gibbon did make a comparison between the two Empires; see Misc. Works, p. 313. And at least one of his judgements concerning America proved correct; he predicted that the loss of the American colonies would not ruin England's trade.

The significance of the French Revolution also escaped him. Oblivious of the seething social forces which had finally broken through to the surface, he referred to it as "an outbreak of popular madness." "Could I have forseen the storm," he wrote to Sheffield (Misc. Works, p. 156) he would have arranged his personal plans differently. As late as 1786, he invested in a new loan of the King of France (Ibid., p. 348). Even after the outbreak, he could offer no explanation. "What a strange world we do live in," he wrote, "You will allow me to be a tolerable historian. Yet after a fair view of ancient and modern times, I can find none that bear any affinity to the present" (Ibid., p. 390).

This failure of insight has drawn the censure of critics: "He had no more grasp of what either of them [the War of Independence or the French Revolution] meant to the world of history than Mrs. Partington had of the strength of the Atlantic when she tried to sweep its tide out with her broom" (Henry Morley, Carisbrook Library Edition of Gibbon's Autobiography, p. xv). "Er besass weder die vielseitigen Interessen seines schottischen Zeitgenossen noch dessen historischen Blick. Wenn er grossere Anerkennung gefunden hat, so darf daraus nicht geschlossen werden, dass er der bedeutendere Historiker gewesen ist" (Fueter, Historiographie, p. 369). And a friendly critic lamentsd, "all those years of contemplation of the downward course of ancient things left him not a whit more philosophically alive to the main drift of his own age than the ordinary run of its politicians . . ." (Robertson, Gibbon, p. 103). But it was precisely the extent of the historian's involvement in 'ancient things' which made it difficult if not impossible for him to be a competent critic of his own age.

41. Justification for the inquiry into ecclesiastical history.

While the main line of justification was in tracing Christianity's contribution to the Empire's fall, still the historian might properly analyse the new situation which emerged as Rome

declined. As Adolphus Ward ("Gibbon" in The Cambridge History of English Literature, X, 313) observed: "How it [the Empire] gradually verged to decline and fall is only half the story. The other half shows how its fall was followed by long centuries of life in the eastern, and a revival, under new conditions, of its existence in the western world. He [Gibbon] bids us consider not only what it was that declined and fell, but also what grew into life."

Gibbon often stated the reason for his involvement in ecclesiastical history. Thus he wrote, "So deeply did they effect the decline and fall of the empire, that the historian has too often been compelled to attend the Synods" (VI, 115). "The flames of the Arian controversy consumed the vitals of the empire" (II, 462). To account for his extensive treatment of the Crusades, Gibbon charged that "they undermined the Gothic edifice" (VI, 462). And in introducing his chapter on Monasticism, Gibbon wrote, "The indissoluble connexion of civil and ecclesiastical affairs has compelled and encouraged me to relate the progress, the persecutions, the establishment, the divisions, the final triumph, and the gradual corruption of Christianity" (IV, 62).

Sensitive to the charge of an excessive interest, he claimed that he was not concerned "with the dark abyss of predestination and grace" (V, 176). And he commented sardonically, "The reign of the four successors are distinguished by a rare though fortunate vacancy in ecclesiastical history" (V, 149). Again, "The historian of the empire may overlook those disputes which were confined to the obscurity of schools and synods" (IV, 104).

42. The surmise of critics.

J. M. Robertson (Gibbon, p. 78)wrote, "The main fallacy of Gibbon was in calling Christianity the cause of the decay of the Empire." This critic also recognized that Gibbon was groping for the 'real' causes, (pp. 97, 100); but that he mainly subscribed to the common view is indicated by the following criticism of Morison: "If he had argued that Gibbon erred in calling Christianity the cause of the decay of the Empire, he would have been right" (p. 84). A. H. Thompson (Gibbon, p. 8)argued, "In Christianity he saw the power which had sapped the greatest of human institutions and he brought all his command of irony upon the cause of this catastrophe" Algernon Cecil (Six Oxford Thinkers, p. 234) wrote with reference to "the greatest tragedy of which history has to tell": "For so unnatural an event there must [for Gibbon] have been an unnatural reason. That reason he found in Christianity." The more recent study by Shelby McCloy echoed the general verdict; he cited "Gibbon's main contention that the rise and progress of Christianity was the primal cause of Rome's decay and fall" (McCloy, op. cit., p. 50). F. H. Ridley argued that "to attribute the collapse [of the Empire] to the triumph of Christianity as Gibbon did, is absurd" (Julian the Apostate, p. 56). Arnold Toynbee (The Study of History, abr., p. 260) claimed that in Gibbon, "The Hellenic Society, embodied in a Roman Empire which was at its zenith in the Age of the Antonines, is represented as having been overthrown by a simultaneous assault from two alien enemies attacking on two different fronts: The North European barbarians . . . and the Christian Church." But the best known indictment was made by the friendly editor, J. B. Bury, who interpreted the statement, "I have described the triumph of barbarism and religion," as meaning that for Gibbon, "the historical development of human societies

since the second century after Christ was a retrogression for which Christianity was mainly to blame" (I, vii).

J. B. Black (The Art of History, p. 170) dissented from the common view arguing that "the disparagement of Christianity is a different thing from singling it out as the chief cause." And F. Meinecke (op. cit., p. 252) concurred: "Es ist nicht richtig, dass er in erster Linie dem Christentum die Schuld am Verfall des Reiches zuschreibe, denn das 'langsame und geheime Gift' sah er schon lange vorher in seinen Eingeweiden wirken." Meinecke in a note (Ibid., p. 252) reported that Trude Benz, in Die Anthropologie in der Geschichtschreibung des 18 Jahrhunderts (1932), joined in this conclusion, but the present writer has not seen the latter reference.

Bury appeared to echo the view of the cause of the decline which has been attributed to Gibbon, when he wrote, "In the strength of ancient ideas lay the strength of the Roman empire; Christianity was the solvent of these ideas, and dissolved also the political unity of Europe" (A History of the Later Roman Empire, 1889, p. 1). But Bury's view changed. As Harold Temperly, in an Introduction to Selected Essays of J. B. Bury, pointed out, "In the earliest study, he adopted conventional explanations . . . in his latest [1923] he adopted the 'contingency' theory throughout," which asserted that the fall of Rome could be attributed to a "conflux of coincidences." Such shifting is perhaps illustrative of Bury's famous remark that an historian did not do his duty unless he changed his mind every two years.

43. Inquiry into actual causes.

Critics have often ignored or overlooked the fact that this inquiry was made by Gibbon. Thus Algernon Cecil (Six Oxford Thinkers, p. 32) after subscribing to the traditional view that Gibbon regarded Christianity as the cause of the Empire's collapse, proceeded to rehearse some of the 'real' causes of that occurrence, which actually added little to Gibbon's own analysis, but which, the critic claimed, "constitutes the real reply to the innuendo of The Decline and Fall." And Coleridge complained that "to call it a history of the decline and fall, was there ever a greater misnomer? I do not remember a single philosophical attempt made throughout the work to fathom the ultimate cause of the decline and fall of the empire." This reference to Table Talk was cited by Robertson, Gibbon, p. 40. The only possible defence for Coleridge's comment is by virtue of a narrow, nineteenth century connotation of the term 'philosophical'.

The concern to uncover causes produced at least one instance of clear contradiction; for in one instance Gibbon argued that the chief "immediate" cause was the abandonment of curiases and helmets by the army in the reign of Gratian; but in a later chapter he contended that the chief immediate cause was the great settlement of the Goths in the east beginning in the reign of Valens. (This contradiction was cited by Robertson, Gibbon, p. 97.)

44. Inadequacy of the inquiry.

J. Macmurray has argued (Conditions of Freedom, p. 64) that force can never establish security and must always finally defeat its own purpose since it inevitably produces fear and insecurity. But it

is worth noting that in his annotated copy of the History, Gibbon wrote, "Should I not have deduced the decline of the empire from the civil wars which ensued after the fall of Nero, or even from the tyranny which succeeded the reign of Augustus. Alas, I should, but of what excuse is this tardy knowledge. Where error is irreparable, repentance is useless" (I, 1896, xxxv). In still another instance, it would appear that Gibbon anticipated his critic; for Toynbee (The Study of History, p. 261) wrote, "When the whole story is taken into account, the rapid decline of the Empire after the Antonine Age is seen to be not at all surprising." But Gibbon himself had written, "Instead of inquiring why the Roman empire was destroyed, we should rather be surprised that it had subsisted so long" (IV, 174).

45. A scientific study.

A critic argued that in explaining the success of Christianity, there was in addition to the operation of the Supernatural and "the very lowest of moral principles" a third factor, "the highest kind of moral principle." Sara Hennell (Early Christian Anticipation of an Approaching End of the World, p. 67) wrote: "The supposition on the part of Gibbon that it was possible to effect a due consideration of the history of Christianity while this prime element was either left in the background or entirely ignored is the deficiency . . . of . . . his philosophy." But Gibbon's position was clearly closer to orthodoxy, which teaches that there is no "highest kind of moral principle" apart from the operation of the Supernatural; and this latter, Gibbon, as a scientific historian, had specifically pledged himself not to attempt to evaluate.

46. Views of critics on Gibbon's approach.

Adolphus Ward ("Gibbon," op. cit., p. 317) contended, "Nor did he ask his readers to shut their eyes to the cardinal fact . . . that 'in the Christian dispensation as in the material world, it is as the first great cause that the Deity is most understandably present'." And MacDonald ("Irony in History," op. cit., p. 546) concurred: "He nowhere intimates that these secondary causes are sufficient (but the contrary) to account for the progress of Christianity and . . . he unmistakably asserts that these causes were used or over-ruled by Divine Providence to execute the purpose of promoting the reception of this pure and humble religion." The real intent of Gibbon's irony appears so evident that this misreading of his meaning must be attributed to the desire to provide an interpretation which deviated from the traditional one.

47. The famous five causes.

Morison (Gibbon, p. 24) argued that these were 'effects' rather than 'causes' and were explicable only as the result of "deep antecedent forces." How these 'deep antecedent forces' might be analysed by the scientific historian, the critic did not indicate; nor had the awareness that effects may also be causes, apparently occurred to him. Most modern Christian scholars would concede that they may rightfully be considered 'causes'. Cf. Walker, op. cit.,

p. 493. Among Gibbon's early antagonists, the debate hinged upon the question of the sufficiency of such factors in explaining the success of Christianity.

48. The zeal of the Christians.

Critics have contended that the positing of a Jewish origin was inadequate to explain the real emergence of this passion which led people to embark upon "one long trial of self denial" (Morison, Gibbon, p. 123). J. H. Newman (An Essay in Aid of a Grammar of Assent, p. 458) argued that it was not from the Jews but from "the thought of Christ" that Christian zeal stemmed. The inference was that Christian zeal is inexplicable apart from a supernatural explanation. But as has been argued, how must one account for the zeal which inspired Mohammedanism? Might it not with equal validity point to the inevitability of a supernatural explanation?

49. The belief in immortality.

In an argument with Sheffield on the question of immortality, Gibbon indicated astonishment "at the horror some conceive at the idea of annihilation," since "how can that be dreadful of which one cannot be sensible . . . Eternal existence might be a blessing but still I should not think of it when annihilated" (Among the Gibbon Papers, IX, 49).

Critics have not been satisfied with Gibbon's handling of the belief in immortality. Thus Morison (Gibbon, p. 124) demanded, "Whence arose . . . the sudden blaze of conviction with which the Christians embraced it?" But is it within the scope of the scientific historian to attempt to answer this question? Another writer complained, "He implies throughout his representation that the Jews received the belief solely as a means of heightening their own present worldly advantages" and that "the same effect goes on increasingly in the hands of the Christians" (Hennell, op. cit., p. 78). It would be difficult to establish a sole motivation for any belief; yet Gibbon might properly point out that the conviction of immortality was not without its practical, present-worldly value. Henry Milman, who had once criticized Gibbon for finding natural causes for the rise of Christianity, later wrote, "There can be no doubt both that many of the early Christians almost hourly expected the final destruction of the world, and that this opinion awed many timid believers into the profession of Christianity, and kept them in trembling subjection to its authority" (History of Christianity, I, 455).

50. The miracles.

Occasionally Gibbon did advance what may be regarded as a naturalistic interpretation of the miracles. Thus he wrote, "A seasonable storm of rain, hail, and lightening, which refreshed the Romans and dismayed the barbarians was improved into a miracle," which might be variously ascribed to Egyptian magic, to Jupiter and Mercury, or to the God of the Christians" (Among the Gibbon Papers, VII, 293). Again, "Every event or appearance, or accident, which seems to deviate from the ordinary course of nature has been rashly ascribed to the immediate action of the Deity" (II, 322). It may be argued

that normally Gibbon regarded a naturalistic interpretation to be identical with a denial of miracle which could be understood on no other basis than the operation of the Supernatural. But Gibbon would have been on firmer ground merely to advance the naturalistic explanation and permit the reader to formulate his own final conclusion.

The historian cited the instance of Irenaeus, a bishop of Gaul though an Asiatic, who, though needing the gift of speaking in foreign tongues supposedly bestowed upon others, was compelled to struggle as best he could with a barbarian dialect (II, 30). Thus there is no basis for the critic's supposition that Gibbon's impulse to expose the falsity of post-apostolic miracles suggests that he assumed that there were true miracles. Macdonald ("Irony in History," op. cit., p. 555) contended, "In the contrast which he runs between the true and the false, he does not merely concede, but claims, that there must have been true miracles."

51. The good works of the Christians.

Gibbon argued that the concern for the reputation of their society might have been a motive for martyrdom among the Christians. "Could we suppose that the bishop of Carthage employed the Christian faith only as an instrument of ambition, still it was incumbent on him to support the character he had assumed" (II, 110). Yet these martyrdoms were not without effect, for "the morality which led to a mortification of the flesh" and a strict denial of the normal pleasures was "so extraordinary and so sublime as must inevitably command the veneration of the people" (Ibid., p. 110). This sentence smacks of irony; yet one does not sense irony in the historian's treatment of the good works of the Christians. It is doubtful whether the critic's inference is sound: "In suggesting that the progress of Christianity was aided by the virtues of its first converts, we feel that Gibbon wrote with tongue in his cheek" (Edward Clodd, Edward Gibbon, p. 52). This would appear to be a projection of the supposition of an all-consuming animosity for which there is no foundation.

52. Ecclesiastical organization.

Synods had obvious advantages over the independent congregations. Especially as the numbers of the Christians multiplied, clear benefit could be derived from a close union of their interests and designs. "It was natural," Gibbon observed sardonically, "to believe that a liberal effusion of the Holy Spirit would be poured on the united assembly of the delegates of the Christian people" (II, 46).

Rome's rise could be explained due to its position as "the greatest, the most superior, and among the western churches, the most ancient of all Christian establishments" (II, 48). This circumstance, and the fact that Rome could claim two apostolic founders, Peter and Paul, supported the ascendency of the Roman primate.

James Bryce (The Holy Roman Empire, p. 9) ascribed a motive for the development of ecclesiastical government other than the passion for power: "Its (Christianity's) inexperience was perplexed by a sphere of action vast and varied. The natural course seemed to be to follow the precedent of the state and sacrifice individual

freedom to uniformity and precision. Thus a hierarchy shaped itself." But the contemporary Christian historian, Herbert Butterfield, concurred with Gibbon. In illustrating the contention that power is self-perpetuating and leads inevitably to corruption, Butterfield argued, "We can see enough in history to justify the assertion that . . . in the . . . 'Church' (having in mind those visible ecclesiastical organizations that play their part in mundane history) the same principle holds good, for even there, men will go on simply expanding their power once they see that they are in a position to do it with impunity" (Christianity, Diplomacy, and War, p. 56).

53. Motives of the Christians.

Greed motivated Christians, according to Gibbon. E.G., "The want of riches could compel them [the bishops] to deserve the public esteem" (III, 375). "A weighty incumbrance of gold is said to have impeded the Cardinal's flight" (VII, 154). "The bishopric is now worth 20,000 ducats, and is therefore much-less likely to produce the author of a new heresy" (III, 161). Gibbon occasionally did stress the economic aspect of ecclesiastical evolution. Thus he wrote, "A general tax . . . was imposed on the laity, and even the clergy of the Latin Church, for the service of the holy war. The practice was too lucrative to expire with the occasion; and this tribute became the foundation of all the tithes and tenths on ecclesiastical benefices which have been granted by the Roman Pontiffs to Catholic sovereigns or reserved for the immediate use of the Apostolic See" (VI, 369).

Ambition, Gibbon argued, was the reason for the immense interest in the government of the Church. It was "the ambition of raising themselves and their friends to the honours and offices" which "was disguised by the laudable intention of devoting to the public benefit the power and consideration which for that purpose only it became their duty to solicit" (II, 42).

54. Materials for a doctrine of original sin.

In his emphasis on the darker, self centered side of human nature, was not Gibbon inadvertently approaching the Christian doctrine of original sin? "A Christian is bound by his very creed to suspect evil. He sees evil where others do not. His instinct is divinely strengthened. His eye is supernaturally keen. He owns the doctrine of original sin, and that doctrine puts him necessarily on guard against appearances and prepares him for recognizing anywhere that which he knows to be everywhere" (Mozely Letters, p. 333, cited by Acton, Lectures on Modern History, p. 26). Gibbon's inquiry into the motivation of human beings has produced materials which might support this hypothesis. Butterfield's assertion (Christianity and History, p. 35) that if history points to any one truth, it is that all men are sinners, would hardly be seconded by Gibbon 'without a thousand reserves'. Yet a plain reading of his judgement upon the 'follies and foibles' of human nature might lead to such an anomalous conclusion.

55. The thought underlying the event.

Referring to Brutus' "God-like stroke," Gibbon argued that "since our esteem is bestowed by the intention rather than the action, we ought to be well assured that the intention was pure from

any interested . . . motive . . . not the hasty suggestion of resentment or vanity, but the calm result of consistent . . . virtue." Gibbon examined various aspects of Brutus' career on the assumption that "it is the uniform tenor of his life . . . which must . . . acquit or condemn" him. His conclusion: Brutus' action in other contexts produced no confidence in the purity of his moral intentions (Among the Gibbon Papers, IX, 264). Whether convincing or not, it did suggest Gibbon's attempt to capture "the thought underlying the event."

Gibbon would not have seconded Acton's conception of history as "a schoolmaster to bring men to Christ" (Acton, Lectures on Modern History, p. xvii), but he did allow that an historian might be a friend to virtue, with these exceptions: allow great latitude in the means; incline more to personal than to social virtue; moderns, if religious, pervert their natural ideas. Cf. Gibbon's "Hints," No. xiii, op. cit., IX, 187.

56. Minute difference in ecclesiastical controversies.

"On the substance of the [filioque] doctrine," Gibbon argued, "the controversy was equal and endless; reason is confounded by the procession of the Deity; the Gospel, which lay on the altar, was silent; the various texts of the Fathers might be corrupted by fraud . . . neither side could be convinced by the arguments of their opponents . . . the bishops and monks had been taught from their infancy to repeat the form of mysterious words; their national and personal honour depended on a repetition of the same sounds" (VII, 115). The Christian theologian, Reinhold Niebuhr, has conceded that "this fact [that all forms of holiness and all signs of redemption must be related to God's nature] hardly justifies the long 'filioque' controversy . . . in which theologians sought abortively, either to prove or to disprove that the Holy Spirit proceeded from only the Father or from both the Father and the Son" (Faith and History, p. 191).

The impact of enthusiasm, Gibbon argued, was temporary and passing. "The human character, however it may be exalted or depressed by a temporary enthusiasm will return, by degrees to its proper and natural level" (II, 41). "The fine problems of the Incarnation were forgotten in the more popular and visible quarrels of the worship of images" (V, 152). "The religious fervour was the illusion of the moment . . . the sense of interest is strong and lasting" (V, 283).

57. Intolerance among the Christians.

In his Gifford Lectures, entitled "Religio Historici," "Religion in a Westernizing World" (delivered at the University of Edinburgh, New College, in October-November, 1953), Arnold Toynbee noted the treatment of this topic by the seventeenth century writer Bayle. Bayle had asserted that the Christians refused to extend to heretics and infidels the privileges they claimed for themselves. Since Gibbon was well acquainted with Bayle's writing — see II, 313, note, for his reference to the Dictionnaire Critique de Chauffepie — there is reason to suppose that he was influenced by the earlier writer. One does not find any specific instance of acknowledgement unless Gibbon's comment that "the celebrated Bayle . . .

has refuted, with superfluous diligence . . . the arguments by which the bishop of Hippo justified . . . the persecution of the Donatists," be so interpreted. (Cf. III, 427, note.)

Tertullian had written, "How shall I admire, how laugh, how rejoice, how exult, when I behold so many proud monarchs, and fancied gods, groaning in the lowest abyss of darkness, so many magistrates who persecuted the name of the Lord, liquefying in fiercer fires than they ever kindled against the Christians . . . so many philosophers . . ." (II, 29).

58. The view of later historians.

Acton (History of Freedom, p. 203) argued, "The Church cannot tolerate any species of government where this right [to freedom of conscience] is not recognized. The Church has succeeded in producing the kind of liberty she exacts for her children only in those states which she has herself created or transformed. Real freedom has been known in no state which has not passed through her medieval action. The Church could never abandon the principle of liberty by which she conquered Pagan Rome." That Acton individually was a staunch defender of liberty cannot be questioned. But his concern for freedom from political encroachments might have naturally led to a comparable concern for the right of conscience to be free from ecclesiastical interference. Is it unfair to suspect that Acton's lifelong allegiance to the Roman Church made this consideration far less crucial than it might otherwise have appeared?

J. B. Bury (A History of Freedom of Thought, p. 35) argued that however much Christians may have claimed the right of toleration when they were a minority, "when a Christian state was established, they would completely forget the principle which they had evoked. The martyrs died for conscience not for liberty. Today, the greatest of the churches demands freedom of conscience in the modern state which she doesn't control, but refuses to admit that when she has the power, it would be incumbent on her to concede it. It was a duty to impose on men the only true doctrine."

John Macmurray (Conditions of Freedom, p. 63) illustrated his contention that real freedom hinges upon two fundamental considerations, cooperation and fellowship, by suggesting the Roman system provided the factor of cooperation, "based wholly upon law and administration," without concerning itself about unities of fellowship, "except in so far as they threaten to disrupt the system of cooperation which it maintains." Christianity, Macmurray maintained, introduced the other essential element, "the binding force of a sense of fellowship which is direct and personal."

59. The idea of individual independence.

"Liberty was in fact the ultimate standard," wrote Bury. "Perhaps there was no deeper feeling in his breast than jealousy of personal freedom and independence" (Autobiography, p. xvi). And Guizot paid tribute to "that liberality of mind which suffers not itself to be bound by institutions or by times" (Guizot's Edition, p. xv). And Meinecke (op. cit., p. 254) added, "Der Typus des vornehmen englischen Geschmacksmenschen schlug in ihm wieder durch.

Shaftesbury hatte einst diesen Typus zu befeelen und zu vertiefen vermocht. Bei Gibbon fuhrte er zu einem geniebenden Intellectualismus von höchster Kraft und unbedingter Selbstsicherheit."

But his independence was not independence from friends. "Yet I feel, " he wrote, "and I shall continue to feel, that domestic solitude suits me ill" (Misc. Works, p. 136).

In explaining his reluctance to attend a masquerade which required for its success a large subscription, Gibbon wrote, I subscribed but am very indifferent about it. A few friends and a great many books entertain me, but I think fifteen hundred people the worst company in the world." This was cited by G. O. Trevelyan, The American Revolution, III, 191.

Gibbon's conception of independence within absolutism may sound strange to modern ears; yet that a system of enforced cooperation is not without attraction has been admitted by no less a defender of freedom than John Macmurray: "The military dictatorship of the world, with scientific instruments of terrorization sufficient to make resistance futile would be a solution to the political task. It is not difficult to imagine conditions arise in the near future which would make it preferable for the mass of mankind to an international anarchy. Under Augustus, the Roman empire did just this for the civilization of its time, and the peace it imposed and . . . the cooperation it achieved were hailed as a boon in its own day and are still held up for admiration in ours" (Conditions of Freedom, p. 102).

Gibbon reasoned that if final authority rested with the aggregate of the people, there was no assurance that the rights of the individual would be respected. "I will never persuade the people to shake off the yoke of absolutism that they may proceed from murmur to sedition, and from sedition to anarchy" (Misc. Works, p. 225). "The most perfect equality of freedom requires the directing hand of a superior magistrate" (II, 44). Thus he concluded that democracy held out the "apple of false freedom," anarchy; and observed that "the blackest demon in hell is the demon of democracy" (Misc. Works, p. 392). Macmurray (op. cit., p. 34) wrote, "Democracy as we know it is not of itself a guarantee of freedom, far less is it to be identified with freedom." He acknowledged also that absolutism occasionally has provided the freedom and stability in society, "so essential to the independence of the individual."

Meinecke wrote, "Einmal kam ihm da bei der Rückschau auf sein Lebenswerk inmitten des Vernunftstolzes wohl der Zweifel an, ob er nicht doch einige Blumen der Phantasie, einige anmutige Irrtumer, mit dem Unkraut des Vorurteils in sich ausgerottet habe . . . . Es war eine ganz leise Berührung mit Strömungen, die seine Zeitgenossen bereits zu bewegen anfingen, ein ganz leises Zeichen, dass die Aufklärung ihre Grenzen zu ahnen begann" (op. cit., p. 255).

60. Conclusion - in defence of Gibbon.

The argument thus would contest two statements made at the Gibbon Centennial in 1894; for M. Erant Duff declared, "Undoubtedly his attitude to Christianity is the feature of his great work which has done most to diminish his influence, and all educated men, to whatever school they belong, now admit with his masterly biographer that it is a most serious blemish" (Proceedings of the Gibbon Commemoration, p. 15). And Frederic Harrison added, "No one now thinks of defending Gibbon's treatment of the rise of Christianity, of the

foundation of the medieval church, of the work of the Catholic apostles, saints, and statesman. Far from being just to the creed he despised, he was more than unjust to the purest and noblest of mankind" (Ibid., p. 22). Also questionable was the contention of the rationalistic writer, Sara Hennell (Early Christian Anticipation, p. 76): "We owe to him a large contribution towards the delineation of the outer surface of Christianity . . . but towards the true history of Christianity, he has contributed nothing." To write thus of a 'true' history is entirely arbitrary and carries no more weight than that of one person's opinion.

The nature of the scientific approach to history has been well stated by the Christian historian, Herbert Butterfield, who wrote: "It was discovered that by restricting oneself to the realm of secondary causes, one could pursue certain kinds of more mundane enquiry to better purpose. This is . . . one of the secrets of the transition to the scientific method of modern times" (History and Human Relations, p. 137). And with respect to science in general, the same critic (p. 102) contended, "A natural scientist is pledged to work in the way Gibbon purported to do; that is to say, he confines his explanations to the causes that are 'under God', and he would be committing an act of sabotage if he brought God into his scientific argument."

The rationalist, Edward Clodd (Edward Gibbon, p. 39) was, therefore, mistaken in contending that "by the concession which Gibbon made to the orthodox in his lip service as to the divine origin of Christianity, he was heavily handicapped. He had to fall back on his ingenuity in suggesting secondary causes." This study has suggested that the device was of real significance in the defence of Gibbon's History as a restricted and a scientific inquiry. Apart from it, his treatment would have been exposed indefensibly to the charge of rationalistic dogmatism.

61. Conclusion - weaknesses and deficiencies.

The ever-present danger of a scientific study is the supposition that its explanation is all-sufficient. Against this, Butterfield (op. cit., p. 138) effectively argued that "it was a modern piece of wilfulness which made men think that technical history and natural science were qualified to settle ultimate philosophical questions," forgetting "the very factor which gave the scientific method the advantage in efficacy and intensity . . . the restriction of the scope of physical enquiry itself."

Critical history is based upon the assumption of certain fundamental regularity in the life of the past. As Leslie Stephen (English Thought, I, 190) argued, "Rational criticism is possible only on the constant assumption that the phenomena have always been governed by laws now in operation. Admit a systematic interference, or even an occasional interference, and we are at once at sea without a compass . . . the first test of credibility of an ancient document which in the absence of collateral testimony, can be tried only by its inherent probability, vanishes . . ." Against this, Macintosh's argument will not stand: "Historical research as these writers conceive it may without offence be characterized as a particular kind of game, one rule being that wholly unique events, or miracles, do not happen; and if you are going to play the game, you

must keep the rules. You must never discover anything that is supernatural" (Types of Modern Theology, p. 203). But the fact remains that these are the rules of the game. What would appear to be required is not a setting aside of the 'rules', but rather a recognition of their status as such. The absence of such recognition has been the traditional failure of rationalist approaches to history. And the error has been amply exposed. As F. H. Bradley (The Presuppositions of Critical History, p. 15) put it, "There is no such thing as history without a prejudication . . . the real distinction is between the writer who has his prejudications without knowing what they are, and the writer who consciously orders and creates from the known foundation of that which is for him the truth." Thus the conclusion of this inquiry seems warranted: critical history may be autonomous within its field, but it needs to recognize the limits of the field. "The claim, that all scientific activity must vindicate its legitimacy at the bar of 'ratio' nobody will contest. If, however, blind to other forces that may happen to be operative, it poses as monarch in the realm of science, it is guilty of overstepping its judicial competence" (Philosophy and History, p. 328).

62. Conclusion - lasting significance.

G. M. Trevelyan (Clio, a Muse, p. 191) has observed that "the works of great historians of former times should not be relegated to the dust heap because in certain points they have been supplemented or corrected by works of smaller intellectual powers." And Bury (Selected Essays, p. 18) added, "They abide as milestones of human progress . . . they belong to the documents which mirror the form and features of their age, and may be regarded as part of the most valuable material at the disposal of posterity."

If Carlyle's passionate treatment of Cromwell helped to correct a distorted view of dispassionate historians (as Trevelyan, op. cit., p. 180, has suggested), may not Gibbon's 'dispassionate' approach to ecclesiastical history have helped to correct a distorted view of the subject which might be traced to the passionate, partisan allegiance of earlier ecclesiastical historians?

The recognition that Christian faith cannot be based upon historical facts which come within the domain of the critical historian would appear to be well established. Yet modern writers have expressed ideas which suggest continued confusion on this question. Thus H. M. Gwatkin (Early Church History, p. 10) wrote, "By far the strongest blow yet struck at Christianity is Lessing's dictum — that events of time cannot prove eternal truths." But the fact remains that they cannot. And the contention of Oscar Cullman (Christ and Time, p. 32) does not help to clarify the confusion: "All points of this redemptive line are related to one historical fact . . . This fact is the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ." At least this type of statement could contribute to the impression that Christians considered the Resurrection a demonstrable 'historical fact' apart from faith, which in itself is a disservice. The empirically verifiable 'historical fact' was that some people believed there had been a Resurrection. Fortunately, representative Christian thinkers have been entirely clear on this subject: Thus Reinhold Niebuhr has written, "This pinnacle of faith . . . has no support from miraculous

facts in history; neither can it be deduced from a careful observation of the general facts of human nature and history" (Faith and History, p. 169). And the apologist, Alan Richardson, has argued, "Revelation in history is not identical with historical facts; there must be some prior enlightening of the eyes of the mind before either the facts or their meaning can be seen in their true perspective" (Christian Apologetics, p. 107).

Even more significant has been the recognition that critical rationalism has played its part in the recovery of this insight. Thus the Christian historian Butterfield (History and Human Relations, p. 143) has confessed, "Modern science has been beneficial for Christianity in that it has made religion cease to be plausible except as an essentially spiritual thing." And the Christian writer, Basil Willey, has concurred: "Christianity can now be more clearly seen for what it really is than ever before . . . . We . . . owe . . . it to the critical rigours and destructive rationalism . . . which have removed all but the essential foundations of religion" (Christianity, Past and Present, p. 131).

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